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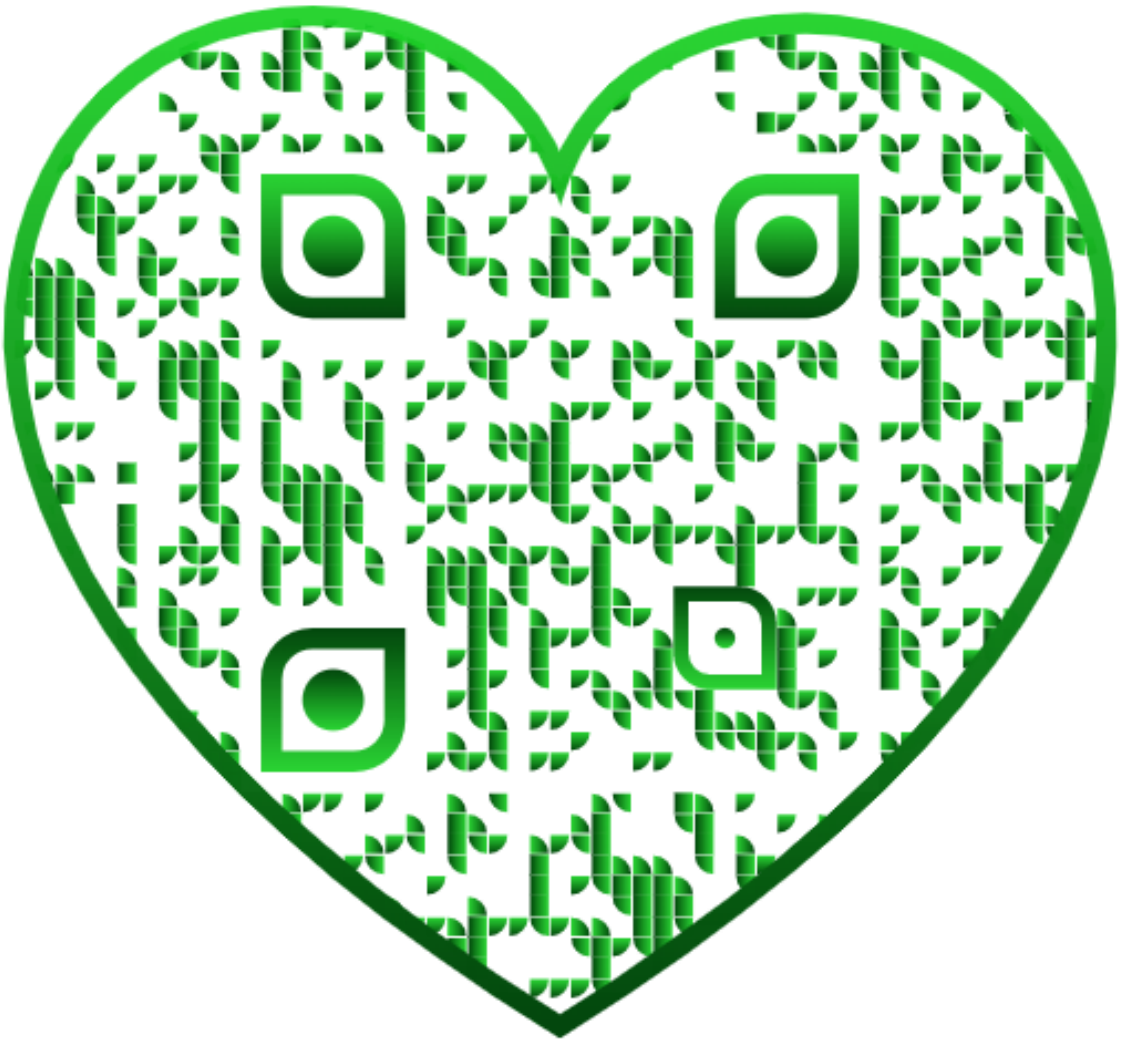

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AS WE SEE IT

BY JIM AUSTIN

THIS ISSUE: Is Apple's Dolby Atmos really that bad?

A bleak shadow

On this page in *Stereophile*'s December issue, contributing editor (and mastering engineer) Tom Fine and I described a press event at which Apple Corps (the Beatles umbrella corporation) presented the news about the (at the time) forthcoming new Beatles single and the forthcoming "remixed" reissues of the "Red" and "Blue" Beatles compilations.[1] Tom attended the event—which, notably, was held at Dolby headquarters here in New York City, reflecting, apparently, Apple Corps' interest in Dolby Atmos. At the event, demos were presented in the Atmos format only—no stereo.

A key point of that column was that Apple Corps, at least—and who knows how many others in the music industry—are abandoning high-quality Atmos in favor of that streamed by Apple Music. Tom and I criticized this development in no uncertain terms, concluding that if Apple's lossy-compressed version of Dolby Atmos is what we're being offered, "we should hope for its demise."

Were we too harsh? I asked an expert.

Far and away the most common distribution method for Dolby Atmos music is streaming, mainly via Apple Music. *That* Dolby Atmos, though, is lossy-compressed, to 768kbps. Note that that's the total bitrate and not the per-channel bitrate, and this form of Atmos supports up to 128 virtual channels. That's in contrast to the version of Atmos typically provided in "deluxe" Blu-ray packages: the "TrueHD" form.

At the event, Tom asked Apple Corps CEO Jeff Jones whether Beatles music would be made available in a better immersive form, perhaps on a Blu-ray disc, as it had been on some earlier "remixed" Beatles albums. His response: The streaming version of Atmos "made the Blu-ray obsolete." Why? Because that Blu-ray disc raises prices, and "very few consumers care."

That's probably true. Unfortunately, *Stereophile*'s readers (and writers) are precisely those "very few consumers."

How widely Jones's opinion is shared in the industry is, of course, unknown. I fear that it is widespread, if only because we've seen (and heard) this before: The industry has long felt secure appealing to the undemanding center. The development of widespread lossless and hi-rez music streaming (in stereo) was a very welcome surprise.

As I write this, the December *Stereophile* hasn't been out that long, but the opinion we expressed has already proved controversial. Some perceived it as a "get off my lawn"–type judgment on immersive audio generally, or even of multichannel music, which of course it was not. One prominent audio engineer, who has worked on a lot of hit records, said he thought we were wrong on the facts—that Apple's Dolby Atmos is not in fact lossy (how could he not know that?), but that even if we were right, it didn't matter, because the work of those wonderful recording engineers (including, presumably, the ones who don't understand the format's technical limitations) would render any lossiness moot.

It's true that our argument had a vulnerability. Ultimately the proof is in the listening, and I've never heard Apple's lossy Atmos on a really high-quality system. In stereo, 768kbps is an impressive bitrate; it would be difficult to differentiate from full CD-rez. Maybe—just maybe—it is good enough for Dolby Atmos, despite its being a profoundly multichannel format.

Morten Lindberg is the producer and recording engineer for Norwegian music label 2L. He has been nominated for 35 Grammy Awards and won one, in 2020, for Best Immersive Audio Album. Nominations continue to roll in.

2L is notable for its commitment to astonishing musical and technical standards. On the technical side, Lindberg records in 24/352.8, in 12 channels: 7.1.4.[2] That resolution is preserved throughout editing, mixing, and mastering. What happens after that depends on the distribution format—and 2L offers the widest selection of distribution formats of any label I'm aware of, all the way up to 12-channel 24/352.8.

Importantly, for my purposes, 2L offers Atmos downloads in two forms: the lossless "TrueHD" format Tom and I praised and what 2L calls "Dolby Atmos in MP4 file."

Every recent 2L release, then, is available in both the highest-quality lossless Atmos and (as I confirmed) a lossy Atmos version identical to what Apple Music streams.

I asked how Dolby Atmos files are made. "I don't mix for a codec," Lindberg told me in an email interview. "I record for a playback environment. Any codec should then ideally provide for a transparent transport to the consumer. Our immersive workflow is totally independent of destination format." "Our 7.1.4 channel-based master"—which as noted is 24/352.8—"is then mapped to eight bed channels, and the four height channels are defined as static objects. Creating the Dolby Atmos Master ADM (Audio Definition Model) is simply a matter of implementing the metadata and converting sample rate to 48kHz." Though a factor of 7.35 smaller than the original source, "the resolution at this point is still uncompressed linear PCM, in discrete channels. The ADM is encoded to MLP (Meridian Lossless Packing) for Dolby Atmos in Dolby TrueHD as you find on our Pure Audio Blu-ray and in the MKV container.

"The ADM is our delivery format to the aggregators for the consumer services. Unfortunately, the services currently reduce the resolution by perceptual encoding compressing 10:1, very much like MP3. Tidal make two paths; for binaural on mobile devices for headphones they use AC4-IMS"—that's a binaural codec, not multichannel, something I had misunderstood—"and for speaker environments they go with DD+JOC"—what's commonly referred to as Dolby Digital Plus with Dolby Atmos. "Apple Music stays with the latter codec for both speakers and its special headphone virtualization.

"Our MP4 version of Atmos is identical to Apple Music's version, at 768kbps. Our Dolby TrueHD bitrates average around 6000kbps with peak data rates up to a maximum of 18,000kbps for high sampling rate multichannel content." For comparison, stereo 24/192 uncompressed has a bitrate of about 9000kbps, so that's a lot of data.

What, then, is Lindberg's judgment on the version of Atmos disseminated by Apple Music?

"The lossy version of Atmos is to me a bleak shadow of the real, uncompressed source." ■

1 See stereophile.com/content/beatles-last-stand.

2 For Atmos, the number after the second decimal is the number of "height channels."

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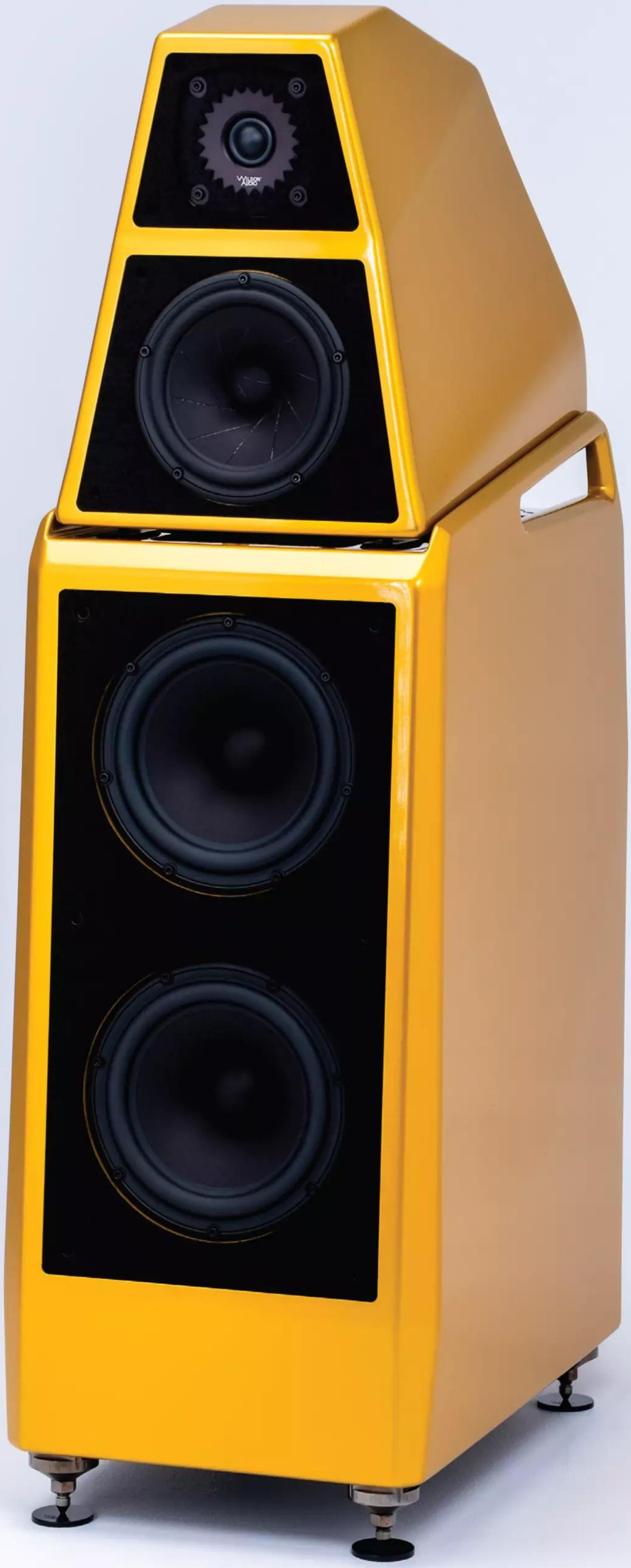

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FEBRUARY 2024 Vol.47 No.2

FEATURES

111 Records to Live For!
Our writers each choose two recordings that help make it all worthwhile.

EQUIPMENT REPORTS

38 Wilson Sasha V loudspeaker
by Sasha Matson

51 Luxman L-509Z integrated amplifier
by Ken Micallef

63 Ferrum Wandla D/A processor
by Herb Reichert

77 Klipsch The Nines integrated loudspeaker system
by Tom Fine

89 JMF Audio HQS 7001 monoblock power amplifier
by Jason Victor Serinus

101 Focal Bathys wireless Bluetooth + wired headphone
by Rogier van Bakel

FOLLOW-UP

106 Audio Research I/50 integrated amplifier
by John Atkinson

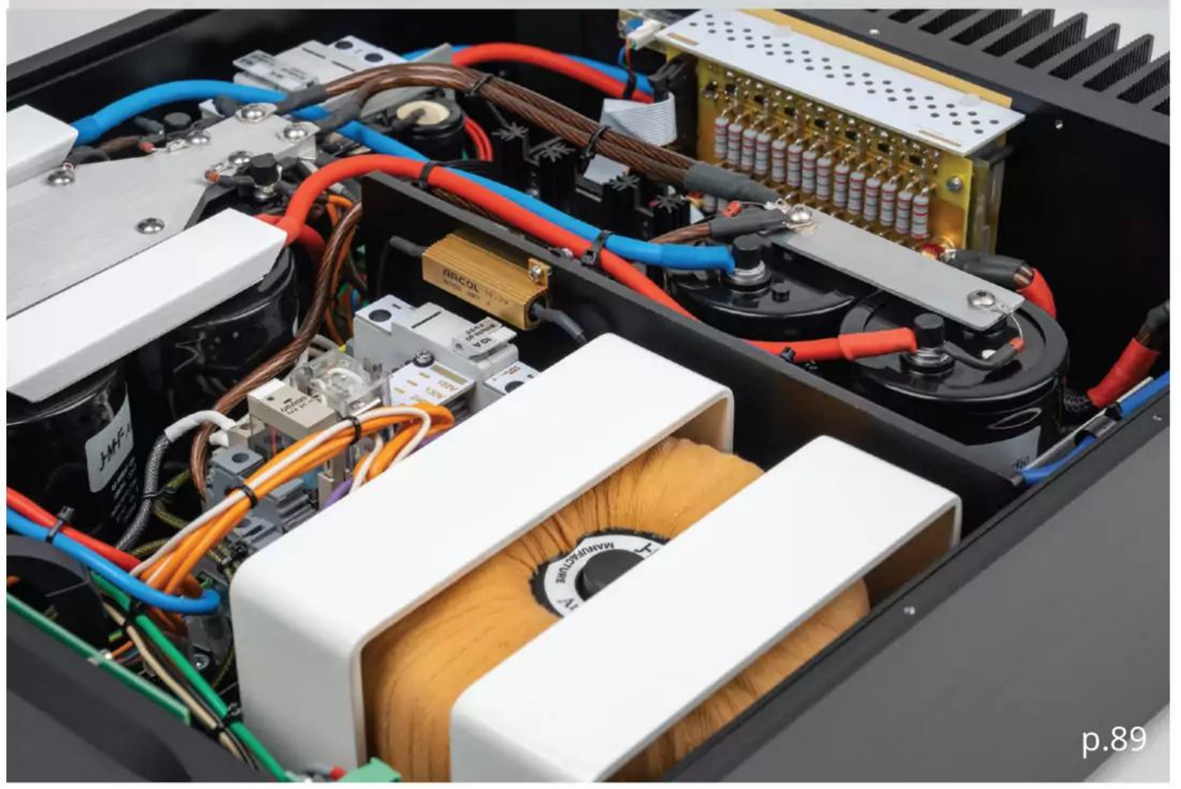
SEE OUR EXCLUSIVE EQUIPMENT REPORT ARCHIVE AT WWW.STEREOPHILE.COM

p.51

p.101

p.77

p.63



p.89

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FEBRUARY 2024 Vol.47 No.2

3 As We See It
An expert opinion on Apple Music's lossy Dolby Atmos. By Jim Austin.

11 Letters
Herb's taste; BBC oops!; the Beatles in Atmos; Future audiophiles?

13 Industry Update
A report from the Warsaw hi-fi show—plus upcoming audiophile events worldwide.

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STAY INFORMED: GO TO **STEREOPHILE.COM FOR UP-TO-THE-MINUTE INFO.**

19 Gramophone Dreams
A yearning for electrostatic midrange—plus, the Feliks Envy headphone preamp. By Herb Reichert.

27 Brilliant Corners
A few timeless records from four singers who remade country music. By Alex Halberstadt.

33 The Spin Doctor
Soviet-era hi-fi and two phono cartridges from Lithuania's Aidas. By Michael Trei.

133 Aural Robert
A newly released live session by Gram Parsons in his prime, from Gram's daughter Polly and the cofounder of Amoeba Music. By Robert Baird.

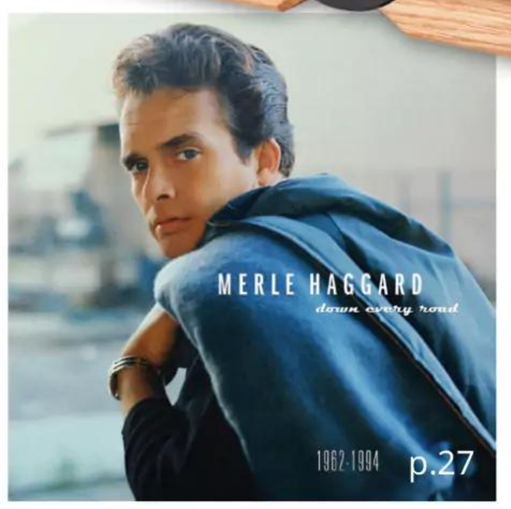
135 Revinylization
A MoFi Ultradisc One-Step of Bruce Springsteen's debut album, *Greetings from Asbury Park, NJ*. By Robert Baird.

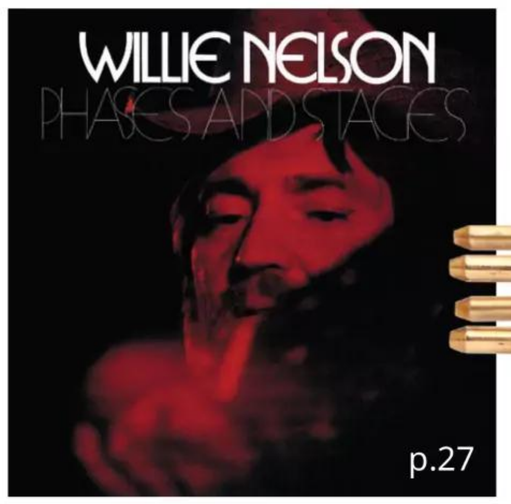
137 Record Reviews
This month's Recording of the Month is Jerome Sabbaugh's *Vintage*, with an all-star cast of pianist Kenny Barron, bassist Joe Martin, and drummer Johnathan Blake. Plus reissues of classic albums by Social Distortion, Mötley Crüe, and the Allman Brothers Band; new jazz from vibes newcomer Chien Chien Lu, drummer Mareike Wiening, bassist Billy Mohler, and trumpeter Ambrose Akinmusire (with Bill Frisell); and new classical recordings of work from Reinbert de Leeuw, Sandrine Piau, Prokofiev (the 5th, from Noseda and the LSO), and Tchaikovsky (the 4th, from Welser-Möst and the Cleveland Orchestra).

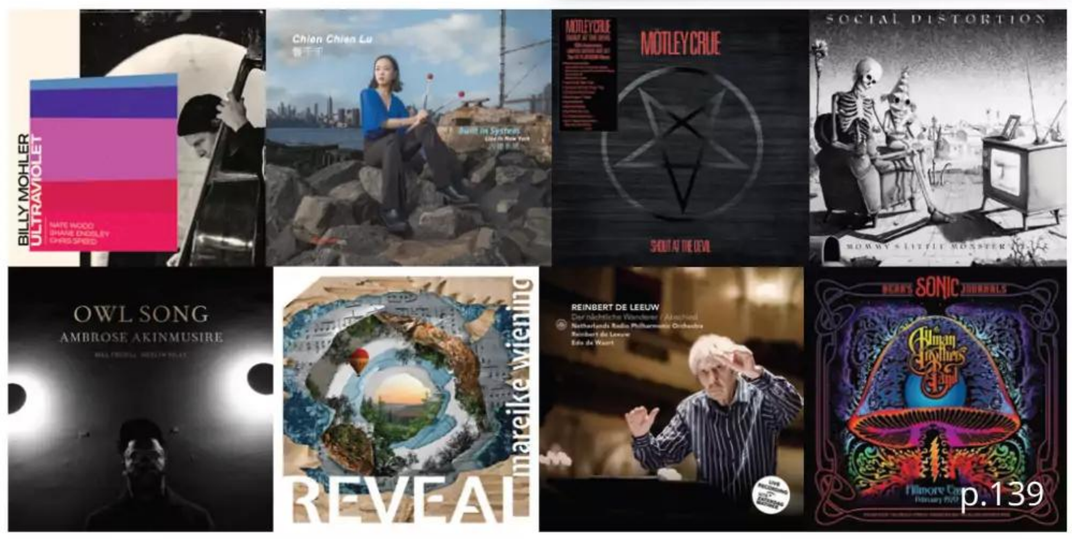
149 Re-Tales
An amicable split results in a new dealership in Upstate New York. By Julie Mullins.

152 Manufacturers' Comments
Representatives of Luxman, Ferrum, JMF, Focal, and Audio Research respond to our reviews of their products.

154 My Back Pages
Shane MacGowan, UK's Irish poet of displacement. By Phil Brett.

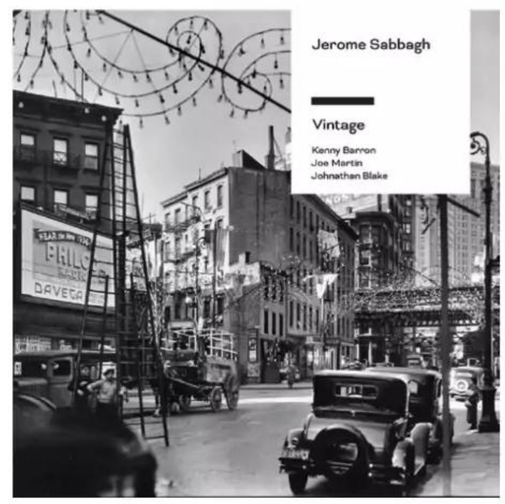






INFORMATION

150 Dealers' Showcase
150 Manufacturers' Showcase
153 Audio Mart
153 Advertiser Index



p.137

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LETTERS

FEEDBACK TO THE EDITOR

TAKE HEED! Unless marked otherwise, all letters to the magazine and its writers are assumed to be for possible publication. Please include your name and physical address. We reserve the right to edit for length and content.

Herb's taste

Whenever, exactly, did Herb end the LSD thing, anyway? (Gramophone Dreams, December 2023). Thank God for mind expansion, whatever the source. You go Herb—don't ever stop!

Ken Perkins
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

BBC oops!

Greetings from England. I'm sure I'm not the only subscriber who gasped on reading that the BBC began broadcasting in 1936 (review of the Leak 230, January 2024) and to cry out, "It was actually 1922!" The big news of 1936 was the inauguration by the BBC of the world's first "high definition" television broadcasting service.

I'm perhaps more than ordinarily interested because my father spent his working life with the Marconi Company in Chelmsford, Essex, who were at the center of the new radio operation and then of innovations for the armed forces during WWII and afterwards.

Anyway, thanks for the best hi-fi magazine, which I attribute to the literate writing, which makes the reading a pleasure.

Roger Perry
Wighill, North Yorkshire, England

Mr. Perry, I shared your comment with Rob Schryer, who wrote the Leak review. Here is his verbatim reply: "Damn! I meant BBC's first television broadcast in 1936. Argh!" So, thanks for the correction, and thanks even more for the lovely compliment at the end of your note.
—Jim Austin

The Beatles in Atmos

As We See It from December 2023 really caught my attention.[1] I've been a Beatles fan since 1964. I've been chasing the ultimate sound quality in music for more than 55 years. I've been an Apple Music customer for almost a year and have been very happy with the service. Because I've been so happy with my Apple Music service, I was surprised to see the bitrate you quoted for the Atmos mixes. I own the Beatles Super Deluxe box sets, so I decided to try a comparison. I found the Atmos version of *Abbey Road* on Apple Music and listened. I could hear the difference immediately, but when "Maxwell's Silver Hammer" came on, it was clear: This was not a good representation of Atmos. I know this because I am intimately familiar with the Dolby Atmos mix from the Blu-ray audio disc included in the Super Deluxe set.

In my opinion, Blu-ray audio is the ultimate source for high-definition music. Both *Abbey Road* and *The Dark Side of the Moon*, from Pink Floyd's 50th anniversary box set, are shining examples of high-definition music presented in Dolby Atmos. I hope Apple Music will work on improving their Atmos versions rather than just going away.

Tim Howard
Normal, Illinois

The recent abrupt change of policy regarding future Beatles archival projects, imposed by Apple Corps CEO Jeff Jones, are blatantly hostile towards older (first and second generation) Beatles fans. I'm 67 years old, and I lived during The Beatles' era. I understand that, for both commercial and cultural reasons, it is necessary to cultivate new generations of fans. But does Jones have to snub and jettison the older fans? The new remixed "Red" and "Blue" albums, and in particular the "Loudness Wars" processing of the song "Now and Then," are obviously aimed at these new fans.

If saying goodbye to the older fans is what Mr. Jones wants to do, then at least give these fans (who have fed The Beatles cash cow for six decades) a decent farewell. As one last act of courtesy, permit *Rubber Soul* to be released as a Super Deluxe boxed set. Then, if Jones wants to slam the vault door shut, I'm okay with that. Prohibiting the types of products older Beatles fans want is no way to say goodbye.

Phil Cohen
Bay Harbor Islands, Florida

Thank you for your As We See It in Vol.46 No.12 about Apple's lossy version of Dolby Atmos. There is an interesting parallel in video playback, where 4K streaming and disc are far from the same. 4K discs provide typically around 100Mb/s, some going up to 120, while streaming services cap out at below 20Mb/s. Sadly, it's rather visible for movies with anything moving fast and/or high dynamic range. Sound familiar to an audiophile?

Let's hope that physical media stays around or the streaming industry does what Qobuz does already today: open-source, license-free, 16/44.1 or higher resolution.

Benjamin Rehberg
Westchester, New York

I am one of those "very few customers" who care about including hi-rez Blu-rays in deluxe editions. More importantly, there is evidence that Jeff Jones is misreading the market for such products: Steven Wilson, notably of Porcupine Tree, is having a lot of success convincing a wide range of artists of the benefits of multichannel music, including releasing it on physical media, and Rhino is digging deep in the archives to release an ever-expanding number of the original four-channel mixes in their Quadio series of multichannel Blu-ray discs. I have all the deluxe Beatles 50th anniversary (plus George Harrison's *All Things Must Pass*) editions that contain the multichannel mixes, and I would submit that many others, like me, did not buy them to simply hear outtakes.

Jim Luehman
Virginia Beach, Virginia

Future Audiophiles?

I enjoyed the As We See It column in the December issue. A quick story.

My children live in different parts of the country (Dallas and Los Angeles), and for holidays we pick a neutral city to gather (I'm in New York, for now). My portable gear is a Cambridge SoundWorks Model 12.

My kids, and to some degree my sons-in-law (they are respectively curious), make fun of me when I'm looking for the best spot in the Airbnb to place my Model 12. "Just bring your Bluetooth speaker," they say. So last year I did: a Sonos Move, along with the Model 12. So, the sound comparisons began using Tidal tracks, and that old Model 12 impressed.

Enough to sway my daughters and sons-in-law? No. Do Apple and Spotify know this? Yes. Heck, Spotify is still promising some sort of lossless, so far to no avail.

Ed Murray
Oyster Bay, New York

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1 For more on the topic, see this month's As We See It, on p.3.

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INDUSTRY UPDATE

AUDIO NEWS & VIEWS

SUBMISSIONS: Those promoting audio-related seminars, shows, and meetings should email the when, where, and who to stletters@stereophile.com at least eight weeks before the month of the event. The deadline for the May 2024 issue is February 20, 2024.

AUDIO VIDEO 2023, AKA "THE WARSAW SHOW"

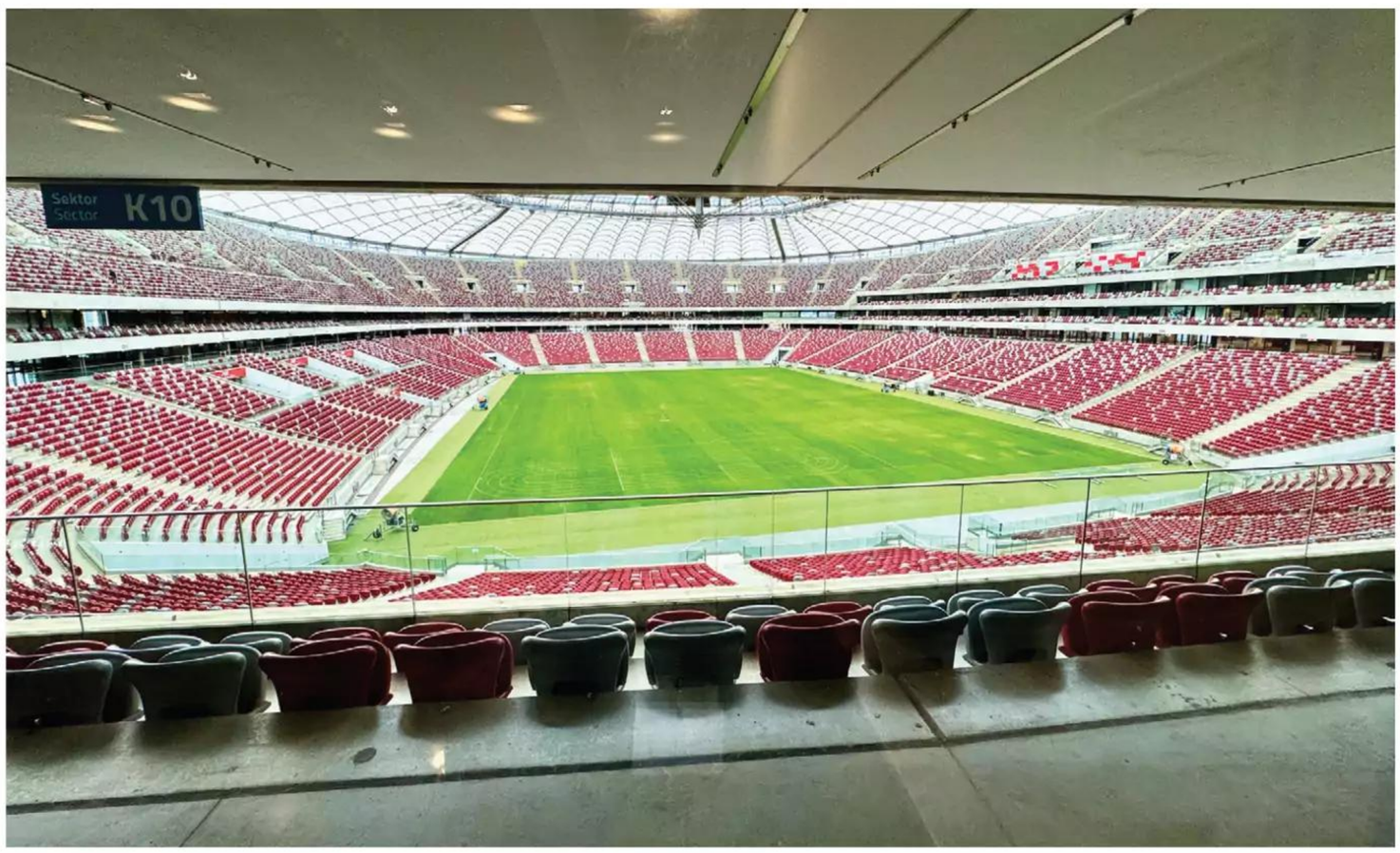
Jason Victor Serinus

At the risk of writing hyperbole, I will state that Audio Video 2023 was unlike any other audio show I've attended. At no other audio show have I encountered so many young people, so many women, and so many brands unknown in the United States. Not even in Munich have I encountered crowds as dense as those that mobbed the show's biggest site, the National Stadium of Poland, PGE Narodowy, on Saturday. A press badge counts for nothing when you're 11" short of 6'3", attempting to see far enough into a huge room to spy a seat. Any seat.

Happily, the majority of attendees at the Warsaw Show did not come to yap away about the stock market or the speaker they built three decades ago. People came to listen, and they respected others who came to listen. Even in the largest rooms, with crowds of some 150 people, it was possible to hear music and learn from presenters' unamplified raps.

DAY 1

My first show experience was the night before opening day: a short preview of un-



Clockwise from top: It really is a stadium; the Circle Labs P300 balanced preamplifier; a Snell Type A replica from Audio Note's Polish distributor.

CALENDAR OF INDUSTRY EVENTS

ATTENTION ALL AUDIO SOCIETIES: We have a page on the *Stereophile* website devoted to you: stereophile.com/audiophile-societies. If you'd like to have your audio-society information posted on the site, email Chris Vogel at vgl@cfl.rr.com. (Please note the new email address.)

It is inappropriate for a retailer to promote a new product line in "Calendar" unless it is associated with a seminar or similar event.

CALIFORNIA

■ Friday evenings, 5–7pm PST: The San Francisco Audiophile Society hosts a virtual happy hour via Zoom. This is open to anyone who'd like to join us to talk about hi-fi and whatever else is on your mind. For more information and registration, visit bit.ly/3RyaqX9.

FLORIDA

■ February 16–18, 2024: The Florida Audio Expo will take place at the Embassy Suites by Hilton Tampa Westshore, 555 N. Westshore Blvd., Tampa, FL 33609. For more information, see floridaaudioexpo.com/contact-us.

ILLINOIS

■ April 12–13, 2024: AXPONA will take place at the Renaissance Schaumburg Hotel and Convention Center in Schaumburg, Illinois. For more information and to buy tickets, visit axpona.com.

TEXAS

■ March 15–17, 2024: A new show from the team behind the Capital Audiofest and Pacific Audio Fest, the Southwest Audio Fest will take place at the Anatole/Hilton in Dallas. For more information, see southwestaudiofest.com or contact Gary Gill or Lou Hinkley at capitalaudiofest@gmail.com or lou@pacificaudiofest.com.

CANADA: MONTREAL, QUEBEC

■ March 22–24, 2024: Presenting hi-fi for more than 35 years, the Montréal Audiofest will take place once again at the Hotel Bonaventure, 900 de la Gauchtière Ouest, Montréal, Quebec H5A 1E4. Show organizers are the same duo behind the Toronto Audiofest, Sarah Tremblay and Michel Plante. For more information, visit montrealaudiofest.org.

usual Snell Type A replicas manufactured by Audio Note distributor Wojtek Szemis and powered by Audio Note gear. I then spent my first show day on the eight exhibition floors of the Radisson Blu Sobieski. According to the show guide, the Radisson alone had at least 100 exhibit spaces, almost all of which hosted active systems.

At first, everything I heard sounded tipped up, edgy, and lacking in warmth, perhaps because those systems had insufficient time to settle in. Finally, when I heard Dylan sing "Man in the Long Black Coat" through Blackwood Artanis active loudspeakers from Croatia, I was able to declare "At last, a solid midrange!" These speakers, which delivered a fair amount of color and air on—sigh—"Hotel California," are sold direct in Croatia, and include in-home setup and DSP calibration.

The next room I encountered where I could finally relax into sound that was realistic and inviting was dominated by Krakow-made and designed Circle Labs electronics. Assisted by trusted and true Dynaudio Confidence 50 loudspeakers and effective room treatment, the sound was so lovely and edge-free that I wanted to sit for hours as I sank into the smoothness of The Bassface String Trio performing "Dream Dancing."

I also enjoyed the pairing of the Czech Republic–based KR Audio VA950, complete with Kron KT150 tubes, and German Physiks HRS-130 speakers. The amp's first stage is solid state; the output stage is tubed. With a Chinese DAC and Romanian wireless Rokna streamer, the sound was spacious. I wish I could have listened longer.

Lo and behold, a premiere: The new Kii Seven Active Wireless Music System. Released October 1 and launched in the US at NAM in January 2024, the Seven system is intended for users who choose to stream via laptop rather than a dedicated server. Claimed to be "completely coherent down to 35Hz," the Kii Seven is happy close to a wall. A sidewoofer handles the lower reaches, and a cardioid system takes over from 130Hz up. The speaker also has a digital input that can process signals up to 24/192 through different DACs on each driver. On organist Jean Guillou's old Dorian recording of *Pictures at an Exhibi-*

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Previous page from left: KR Audio, German Physiks, Rokna; the new Kii Seven; Moonriver, Revival Audio. **This page, clockwise:** Western Electric; Muarah; the crowd in the Gryphon room; Alan Shaw with Harbeth's speaker stand/woofer, the Nelson; the Børresen-Ansuz-Aavik-Nagra room.

tion, the Kii Sevens threw a huge, spacious soundstage with a solid bass foundation.

Moonriver showed its new 505 hybrid phono stage and forecast its 606 integrated for 2024 release. Midrange warmth and power were provided in spades through French-made Revival Audio Atalante 3 loudspeakers. As I listened with pleasure, I recalled once again why I went gaga over the Moonriver 404 integrated's gift of quality sound for a reasonable price.

The big news in the Western Electric room, other than the spacious soundstage created by its 91E Integrated, was the forthcoming 20W 80-series entry level integrated, due in the first quarter of 2024, and the big 102M monoblocks, with hand-built 308B vacuum tubes, which are due in quarter three. The 102Ms are expected to produce about 125Wpc of single-ended triode power. Like the 91E, this new WE amplifier will offer a choice of output transformers, from 4 to 24 ohms, which should allow the amplifier to drive "all speaker loads." Trent Suggs, who is now with WE, said that Western Electric is working with Wilson Audio Specialties to ensure that this and other Western Electric amps are able to drive Wilson loudspeakers. My ears perked up at the thought of reviewing Western Electric monoblocks that can drive my Alexia Vs.

An excellent Polish brand, Fezz Audio, has entered the US market via Bluebird Music distribution. "Silence, warmth, and glow" I wrote of a setup that combined Fezz Titania 90Wpc monoblocks with KT88 tubes, Fezz Sagita preamplifier, Fezz Gratia MM/MC phonostage with 12AU7 tubes, the brand-new Fezz Equinox evo DAC with 12AU7 tubes—the product of a rare collaboration with Lampizator. Also in the system was the Muarah turntable from Poland, expected to be available in the US, and Pylon Diamond 30 MKII speakers available only in Europe and Asia.

Day one ended with a mix of the tried-and-true with products that were new to me: Joseph Audio Pulsar loudspeakers with a Circle Labs M200 amplifier and P300 balanced preamplifier from Poland, J. Sikora Initial MAX Special Edition turntable from Poland with Aidas Durawood cartridge from Lithuania, Amber 3 DAC from Poland's Lampizator, and Cardas cabling. Some would kill for such midrange smoothness.

SATURDAY'S MADHOUSE

Encountering thousands of people at the stadium, I briefly felt like a child wanting to hide under mother's coat. So, I retreated to the relative safety of the ~150 people mobbing the Wilson/D'Agostino/dCS room. Because the standing waves in the stadium's large spaces were virtually uncontrollable—dCS's Alasdair McDonald reported hideous modes at 44 and 88Hz—Wilson's Polish distributor chose to exhibit the new, smallish Sasha V. Also in the system: the new dCS Lina DAC, d'Agostino Momentum M400 MxV monoblocks. The sound was wonderful.

The filled-to-capacity Gryphon room offered excellent sound with Wilson SabrinaX loudspeakers—though, based on my experience, it could have been even better if the speaker grilles had been removed.

The alliance of Ansuz, Aavik, Børresen, and Nagra broke the stadium's all-bets-are-off-in-the-low-bass rule. With help from wood diffusers on the sidewalls, the mighty Børresen M6 loudspeakers impressed with clearly pitched bass on the room's special demo of Sommelier du Son recordings made on old tape players.

Harbeth's Alan Shaw declared that people have asked Harbeth for speaker stands for a good 50 years. Harbeth has gone one better: Customers downsizing and choosing smaller Harbeth speakers that lack deep bass can now purchase Harbeth Nelson speaker stands, which include an active Harbeth-made (sub)woofer. The only control is the one for volume. The Nelson descends to 35Hz, cuts off sharply at 125Hz, and is said to be compatible with any BBC-inspired minimonitor. For the moment, this product is not available in the US.

Poland's Ferrum Audio did something devilish: They displayed a Roon-based system that allied their little Wandla DAC/preamp and HYPSOS power supply with a huge Gryphon Antileon amplifier and simi-

larly large Metrum Lab Stretto loudspeakers from Poland, which Ferrum uses for final tuning and testing. You wouldn't think of pairing these small, relatively low-priced boxes with big, top-level amplification and speakers—at least until you heard them together. Ferrum held its own and acquitted itself wonderfully in far more costly company; the system featured a beautiful mellow top end and a bountiful bouquet of sonic color.

Gryphon's new Diablo 333 integrated, which I covered at Munich High End, joined an Aurender music server and the aforementioned Wilson Sabrina X loudspeakers to produce excellent bass on Finland's Club for Five's rendition of "Brothers in Arms." People sat in silence, enraptured by the sound.

The day ended with a demo that compared the Innuos Pulsar network player with the three-times-more-expensive Innuos Statement Next-Gen (NG) music server. Both contain reclockers designed to remove jitter. Through an Innuos PhoenixNET Network switch, Nagra HD electronics, Rockport Avior II loudspeakers, and Transparent XL cabling, this very colorful system showed how much fuller, larger, and richer music can sound through the top-level Innuos Statement NextGen music server. Bass was extremely solid. As tired as I was, the system gave me the energy to sit down and listen deeply to an LP of "Talking Timbuktu" by Ry Cooder and Ali Farka Touré. Color was excellent, the beat solid, the top not overly bright through Nagra HD monoblocks capable of delivering 1000Wpc into 4 ohms. A perfect close to Day 2.

FINAL DAY DISCOVERIES

My goal on the final day was to visit all the remaining Polish brands recommended by show founder Adam, and then to explore the Blu Sobieski and nearby Hotel Golden Tulip.

Closer Acoustics demoed their new 94dB-sensitive Forlane loudspeakers in an all-Polish system that also included an Elins Audio amplifier and preamplifier and Tentogra turntable. The company's smallest floorstander, the Forlane utilizes 60-year-old distributor resonance cabinet

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technology. The design eschews damping and funnels sound pressure through the birch plywood cabinet to reduce resonance. The speaker, which descends to 40Hz, was partnered with Closer Acoustics' BOB open-baffle subwoofer. The sound on a track by Eydie Gormé & Trio Los Panchos was first-rate.

Lucarto Audio, which sells its "handcrafted" loudspeakers, was paired with Ferro—a DAC, a hybrid integrated amplifier, and a DSD player/streamer—which produced some impressively solid bass on some forgettable Polish pop. Despite the excessive volume, midrange and bass were both standouts on Billie Eilish's "No Time to Die."

Polish speaker manufacturer Qualio Audio makes speakers under the Qualio mark and also designs and manufactures Cube Audio full-range speakers and drivers. With music sourced from a wired computer, the larger Qualio IQ loudspeaker delivered extremely arresting sound. On Ghost Rider's "Make Us Stronger," the smaller Qualio Quantum, paired with Primare electronics, also sounded excellent.

Next door, Cube Audio unveiled its new Lotus speakers with 10" side-firing woofer. The speaker uses neodymium magnets—a switch from Cube's usual choice of ferrite. Powered by an Italian 18Wpc Tektron 211 integrated amplifier, the Lotus produced colorful and satisfying sound.

One can always count on Kostas Metaxas's Metaxas & Sins to deliver unusual products. Behold the new Marquis pure class-A fully balanced headphone amplifier, complete with streamer and DAC and with an optional Swiss L'Epée clock mechanism in its heart; Kostas has designed clocks for L'Epée for the last 12 years. The Marquis produced color and clarity for days on Yvonne Kenney's recording of "I Know That My Redeemer Liveth."

Time to cross the street and climb the narrow spiral staircase to the large rooms on the second floor of the Golden Tulip. I began in one of the most unusual-sounding rooms I've encountered in many a show. It felt as though Galeria Audio's visually striking mating of Kharma Exquisite 3.0 loudspeakers, Aries Cerat DAC, Goldmund Telos 2500NG amplifiers that output 300Wpc into 8 ohms, Goldmund Mimesis NextGen 37S preamp, an Acoustic Plan Vadi CD player (used as a transport), Kharma Veyron speaker cables, and Göbel interconnects had transported me to some altered universe. On Joël Grare's "Le boulet rieur," from *La route des métaux*—a great test track—I heard a warm, polished sound that left me feeling as if I had entered a suspended, immersive sound world. Rarely have I heard such all-enveloping sound from a two-channel system and a CD. Mighty Sam McClain's "Give It Up to Love" sounded equally magical. The polished, pearly sheen was extremely special. "I suppose the sheen isn't natural or neutral," I wrote in my notes. "But if this is a dream, please don't wake me up."

My eyes opened wide when I saw the Destination Audio GM70 tube integrated amplifier and Nika speakers. My ears opened as well given the copious beauty of the sound the system produced from an Ampex 440B playing John Lee Hooker's "Highway 13."

Eyes also opened at the sight of Horn Solutions' modular, Western Electric–style loudspeaker system. Distributed in the US by Wholesale Audio, the system used a Revox reel-to-reel to travel from Maria Callas to Kraftwerk. Electronics, which I was told are very heavy, were from Audio Tekne of Japan.

It was a joy to end the show with the Accuphase A-300 monoblocks I praised in the December 2023 issue of *Stereophile*. In a system headed by Estelon Forza Anniversary Edition loudspeakers, I also heard the Accuphase C-3900 preamplifier, Accuphase DP-1000 SACD, and Accuphase DC-1000 DAC through Siltech Double Crown and Single Crown, and Crystal Cable daVinci cabling. My time was limited and my seat, less than ideal. Nonetheless, on recordings of Albinoni's *Adagio* from Bernd Steidal and "Fever" from Musica Nuda, the sense of space was nothing short of marvelous. What a beautiful way to say goodbye to Warsaw. ■

Previous page from left: Innuos and Nagra (Rockport not shown); Closer Acoustics, Elins Audio, Tentogra; Qualio loudspeakers. **This page, clockwise:** Cube Audio; Metaxas; Kharma, Aries, Goldmund, Acoustic Plan; the Estelon Forza Anniversary Edition; a Destination Audio system.

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GRAMOPHONE DREAMS

BY HERB REICHERT

THIS ISSUE: "Electrostatic midrange" and a 300B-based headphone amplifier from Feliks.

A yearning for midrange

I always say I can't find what I'm not looking for, which doesn't mean I always *know* what I'm looking for. And not knowing what I want is unsettling.

Recently, I was reminded of the thoughts of French polymath-philosopher René Girard (1923–2015), who suggested that people are not actually motivated by specific things like lust or capital or power, as major philosophers have declared, but by subtle, disconcerting forces of existential desire for something outside ourselves, never actually knowing what that something is.[1]

Girard explains how this not knowing drives history and invention. His main premise is that we feel desire but, not knowing *what* we desire, mimic the desires of others. These "others" we mimic constitute a third element, interrupting the lines of force between a person and the objects desired. This, according to Girard, makes desire, and by extension human evolution, a nebulous but powerful anthropological force engaged in forming human cultures.

In other words, you might like big speakers and fat speaker cables, but maybe only because people around you appear to like them. Same with cars and clothes and lovers.

Girard's ideas helped me understand why it took me decades to identify the audio-system sound I've long desired but couldn't describe. Finally, in my dotage, I've recognized this sound and decided to give it a name: *electrostatic midrange*.

I first noticed the electrostatic-midrange phenomenon during my torrid affair with the Koss ESP/950 electrostatic headphones.[2] The toaster-like glow of the 950's hyperdetailed, reverie-inspiring midrange reminded me of seeing the Milky Way when the sky is arctic-region clear, the stars appearing to touch each other. This was my first desire-forming experience.

My second experience forming my desire for electrostatic midrange came with my first set of Quad ESL-57s, which I bought mimicking the taste of friends Michael Trei and David Chesky. On the advice of audio chieftain Harvey Rosenberg, I powered my 57s with a Futterman H3 OTL amplifier. This system showcased truth of tone and hypervivid dimensionality—but only when I sat in the sweet spot. I sold this combination after a few months because the Quad's restrained dynamic and one-person sweet spot did not suit my lifestyle. Nevertheless, that ESL-OTL combo became my prime reference for how a system's midrange should sound.

I don't like it when electrostatic transducers sound brittle and staticky, which many of them do, but when the static is gone and the organic tones and spider-web detail remain, electrostatics' stark vividness becomes spellbinding.

I am recognizing this now because lately I've been using vintage Stax SR-207 and SR-700 Omega electrostatic earspeakers as my daily-driver transducers, and because, for the umpteenth time, a listening room visitor said, "Herb, your system sounds like headphones." I took that as a compliment and wondered if I'd been unconsciously striving for precisely that.

It made the famously hard-to-drive Susvara light up and sing, with great purity and feeling.

I am not saying that *only* electrostatics can make a psychedelic midrange. Indeed, that type of sound is a constant with the components I applaud in this column. For example, the incredible, true-to-life midrange of RAAL's full-range SR1a ribbons could win all contests for superior verity. JPS Labs' Abyss AB-1266 planar magnetics educe a midrange of preternatural clarity. And then there's HiFiMan's HE-R10P closed-back wood-cupped planar magnetics, which might be the kissin' cousin of HiFiMan's maximum-resolution Susvara. The Meze Elite make the smoothest, most cinemagraphic midrange ever. And ZMF's closed-back, dynamic-driver Verité headphone sounds more Koss 950/Quad 57ish than any of the aforementioned planar magnetics.

Each of these headphones delivers a midrange to impress even the most seasoned

1 See bit.ly/3unfDcz.

2 Herb wrote about the ESP/950 in 2016; see bit.ly/Herb-Koss. See Tom Norton's earlier coverage at bit.ly/TNKoss.

and demanding listeners. Each has made me feel like Alice tripping in Wonderland or Dorothy exploring Oz.

My term "electrostatic midrange" describes a type of *sound*. I'll use a different phrase to describe the type of *listening experience* I aspire to: Call it the "Alice & Dorothy effect."

This is the type of sound and listening experience I encountered at CanJam NYC 2023 as I auditioned Feliks Audio's eye-catching Envy headphone amplifier. If a single-ended triode amp paired with the right transducers can't manufacture a toaster-glowing, Milky Way–detailed midrange, what can?

Feliks Envy

We are blessed to live in a time when audio-product diversity is at an all-time high. There's a bewildering tsunami of headphone amplifiers at all price and performance levels. Singling out the best ones to review is like choosing the best doughnuts at the Supermoon Bakehouse on Rivington Street:[3] intense fun but stressful and impossible. All I can do is pick amps that look tasty, which is what I was doing when I asked to review the Feliks Envy at the last CanJam NYC. Those Supermoon pastries are not free, but who cares? Every bite forms a distinct, pleasurable memory—as every track I played did with the Envy powering the HiFiMan Susvara.

Introduced in 2022, the Feliks Envy is a moderate-sized, single-ended headphone amp sporting TJ Full Music 300Bs and Psvane CV-181 (6SN7) twin-triode voltage-amplifier driver tubes. Output power is specified at 8W. It is a zero-feedback design with solid state rectification and "automatic bias" on the output tubes. The uniquely styled Envy is made in Poland and measures 13.7" × 13" × 7.3" and weighs, notably, 33 1/3 lb. The outside of the Envy's chassis appears to be sheathed in solid 3/4"-thick wood. It has three analog inputs, one balanced (XLR) and two unbalanced (RCA), and two preamp-level outputs, one RCA and one XLR. The front panel features two headphone jacks, one of them balanced, an input-selector switch, a three-levels–selectable gain switch, and a big, sexy Volume control knob.

Inside, the Envy is point-to-point wired using single-crystal copper with a Teflon dielectric; the coupling capacitors are Jantzen Superior Z-Cap. The Envy's balanced input transformers are made by Lundahl in Sweden, while its output transformers are made by Edis Ogonowski in Poland. This is heirloom-quality construction.

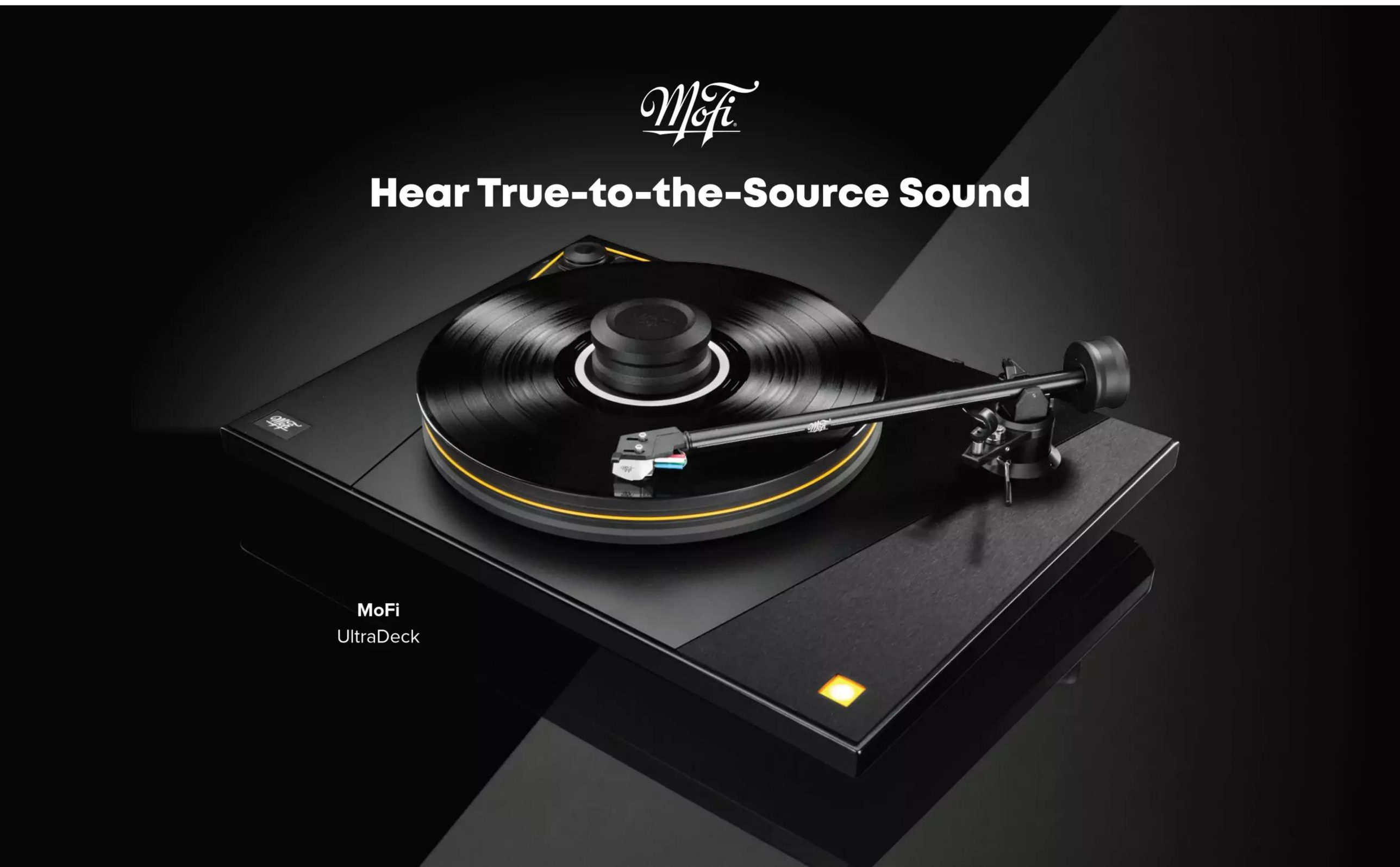
The Standard Edition (in solid Oak) costs $7995 and includes Russia-manufactured Electro-Harmonix Gold 300B tubes,[4] Psvane VA tubes, and "premium copper wiring." The Performance Edition costs $8795 and includes China-manufactured "Full Music 300Bs with nickel anodes, and UPOCC (single crystal copper) wiring." In Walnut, both versions cost $200 more.

The Susvara is legend

With its 83dB/mW sensitivity, HiFiMan's Susvara headphone needs plenty of voltage to produce sufficient volume—hence, high gain. And because its impedance is on the low side, at 62 ohms, it needs sufficient power to support that voltage.

Despite common usage, the terms "gain" and "volume" are not equivalent. Volume refers to an *external* phenomenon: sound pressure level. Gain is an *internal*, electrical phenomenon relating an amplifier's output voltage to its input voltage. The achievable volume depends not just on gain but on headphone sensitivity. To support the gain necessary to achieve sufficient volume into the headphone's load impedance, the amplifier needs sufficient power.

To accommodate difficult loads like the Susvara's, the Envy's power is rated at 8W, and a front-panel control knob allows gain



selection in three steps: Lo, Med, Hi.[5]

When the Susvara was driven at the Envy's lowest gain setting (also a low-impedance setting), music sounded clipped, dull, dark, and distorted. Even with the volume knob set at 5 o'clock, the music was insufficiently loud. At the medium gain setting, the volume level was comfortable with the control at about 12 o'clock; the sound brightened up and got nice. At the Envy's highest gain setting, at the same volume, it's like someone threw a knife-switch and the stage lights went on. It made the famously hard-to-drive Susvara light up and sing, with great purity and feeling.

With most amps, the Susvara's character leans towards dark and serious, but the Envy at the highest gain setting erased that melancholia, substituting clear skies, sunshine, and flowers.

ZMF Verité

Among the several products I've been regarding as unassailable, the sleeper of the bunch is ZMF's $2499, 300 ohm, 99dB, Verité closed-back planar magnetic headphones. Imagine the purest, truest tones with F1 drive and Mississippi Fred–level rhythm keeping. With the Envy powering the Verité, beauty and boogie combined forces to make focused listening easy. Recordings I've thought were not quite right turned out to be extremely right when I listened with the Verité powered by the Envy's Full Music 300Bs.

I've worshipped at the altar of David Lindley, singer-songwriter and master of all stringed instruments.[6] His 1981 debut album with his band El Rayo-X (Asylum LP 5E-524) is spectacular on black disc, but the digital streaming version (16/44.1 FLAC Electra Asylum/Qobuz) has never grabbed me; I never listened all the way through until I listened with the ZMF Verité–Feliks Envy combo. With that, "Mercury Blues" came all the way alive, and my feet weren't tapping the floor; they were *pounding* it. My head was bouncing, and I was cruising on down the road. Plus! I can't mention this album of full-tilt rhythms without a shout-out declaring Ian Wallace, once a member of King Crimson, the alpha dog of funky drummers. On "Mercury Blues," Wallace was so good and having so much fun, he made me laugh out loud in the middle of a song.

After parking my new Mercury, I entered a seaside tango bar, and there she was: the beautiful Argentinian chanteuse Susana Natividad Rinaldi, sounding like Edith Piaf and looking like a singer in a David Lynch film. The seductive tones of Rinaldi's voice forced me to adore her. The dense reverb that framed her voice and made the band's instruments vibrant did not fog the recording's transparency or soften its focus. The album that supplied that vision is called *A Homero Manzi* (16/44.1 FLAC RP Music/Qobuz), and I swear that every instrument and player in her small orchestra was delineated clearly enough to watch and follow what they were doing on the stage.

I drove ZMF's 300 ohm, 99dB-sensitive closed-backs from the Envy's middle gain setting with its volume control set at 12 o'clock; there was some audible hum, but it was well back in space and low enough in level to not interfere with normal music listening.

3 See supermoonbakehouse.com/menu.

4 We're aware of and sympathetic to concerns about buying Russian-made goods during wartime. We feel, however, that audiophile consumers should know the facts and make their own well-informed purchasing decisions. The facts are these: Electro-Harmonix tubes are made in a US-owned factory in Russia. Fortunately, for 300Bs (in contrast to some other tube types), there are excellent alternatives to Russian-made tubes, including the Chinese "Full Music" tubes and the US-made Western Electrics.—**Jim Austin**

5 Until very recently, this knob was labeled "Impedance," and the Feliks website listed impedance specifications—not gain. Feliks recently decided to change the label to "Gain" without changing any of the circuitry.—**Jim Austin**

6 See our obit at stereophile.com/content/among-musical-4-seven-sonic-scenes-david-lindley.

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HE-R10P

In Herbworld, HiFiMan's HE-R10P closed-back wood-cupped planar magnetics are performing at a level equal to or above that of every other model in my headphone herd. In daily use, their comfort and grainless presentation conspire to make them disappear. The R10P's focus and resolve (and $5499 price) are *almost* equal to HiFiMan's $6000 Susvara. Its transparency is almost at the Abyss AB-1266 level. The 83dB-sensitive Susvara are open-back. When my room is quiet, they exhibit a blacker background than the 30 ohm, 99dB-sensitive R10Ps, where I can always hear the vibrating walls of their wood cups. The walls of these head-mounted wood cups also form the boundaries of the R10P's soundspace, but that doesn't bother me. I don't want a distracting puppet show in front of my forehead. If the performers can't be full size between my floorspeakers, which they rarely are, I want them correctly sized between my ears. I need headphones to start off by placing my mind *inside* the recording, then follow that by morphing my attentions to dream places inspired by the music. And the R10Ps do that better than any headphone I know.

More than that, they present explicitly textured harmonic energy in a manner that is beautiful because it's grainless and refined. It is also eerily close to what I experience with my Koss 950 electrostatics. The 950's toaster glow is absent, but its scintillating detail and haunting atmospheres are there in full force. To my delight, the Feliks Envy enhanced the R10P's electrostaticness.

Bahamian folk singer and master guitarist Joseph Spence (1910–1984) mumbles while he plays, and I love it when I can make out what he's mumbling about, which I did easily with the R10Ps driven by the Feliks Envy. I repeatedly played "Coming In on a Wing and a Prayer," from a Spence anthology album called *The Spring of Sixty-Five* (16/44.1 FLAC Rounder/Tidal), because it spurred memories of my childhood and Bing Crosby's famous version. Reproduction was so clear and delectably detailed that I suddenly felt an urge to replace them with Feliks's standard Electro-Harmonix 300Bs, to see how different the standard Envy might sound.

With Electro-Harmonix Gold 300Bs

I admit upfront to being partial to Russian-manufacture Electro-Harmonix Gold 300Bs. To me, these modestly priced, ruggedly built tubes sound a lot like 1950s Western Electric 300Bs but a touch warmer and more diffuse. Like the TJ Full Music 300Bs, they present recordings in a relaxed, full-toned, engaging manner.

As usual, sequence is everything, and after spending weeks with the Full Music 300Bs, I concluded that some users might prefer the E-H's earthbound realism over the slightly fuller, marginally more fantastic-sounding Full Music 300Bs.

I used Electro-Harmonix's Gold tubes to play my current most-played album, *Stravinsky: Histoire du Soldat* (24/96 FLAC, Harmonia Mundi/Qobuz), by my current favorite violinist, Isabelle Faust. With the E-H 300Bs, the sound of this recording was suave and colorful to the max, with a nice triode aura. Dominique Horwitz's engaging narration was the best part: It showed an uncanny sense of artfulness, with high-corporality and standard-setting transparency.

Horwitz's voice was less boldly physical with the TJ Full Music 300Bs, and there was less glow around the tones, but once again the TJ sound was flesh and bone human and emotionally approachable.

With Western Electric 300Bs

I have owned and used Western Electric 300Bs from every decade since they were introduced, as well as a pair of 300As from cinema's pre-code era ca. 1937. Not one of them has sounded anything but bell-clear and Technicolor—never warm or cool or soft or impure. Outer-space–level clarity is the main sonic trait of Western Electric 300Bs, which is also the Envy's most obvious trait. The Envy's stock, Chinese-manufactured TJ 300Bs performed flawlessly and never seemed anything but liquid clear and beguiling, but I could not resist seeing if the Envy's transparency would be upgraded with Western Electric's new, US-manufactured 300Bs ($1499/matched pair).

Western Electric's 300Bs took three hours to sound what I considered normal, but I could tell right away that the change would be interesting to observe. During the Western Electric's fifth hour, I played *Tchaikovsky: Ballet Suites* with the Berlin Philharmonic under the guidance of Mstislav Rostropovich (24/96 FLAC, Deutsche Grammophon/Qobuz). What I heard was intriguing because the change was mostly textural. Compared to the TJ Full Music 300B SEs, the air was cleaner between the instruments, and their outlines seemed more distinct, but my attentions were continually drawn to how minutely textured the sound was. Sound energy appeared to be made of smaller elements, like a shirt made with finer threads. The WE300B's pure, finely textured sound made Tchaikovsky's *Ballet Suites* seem almost analog.

Contrasts were distinctly

I entered a seaside tango bar, and there she was: the beautiful Argentinian chanteuse Susana Natividad Rinaldi, sounding like Edith Piaf and looking like a singer in a David Lynch film.

“ ‘... old is new again’. ”

Cristian Anelli
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more life-like with the Western Electrics, but music seemed more relaxed and approachable with both the TJs and the Electro-Harmonix. I think Feliks made a wise decision to use the base-model TJs, and I imagine many tube-rolling users will have a hard time finding a 300B they like better.

LTA Z10e

Linear Tube Audio's $6950 Z10e integrated headphone amplifier is the centerpiece of my everyday desktop system. It's anchored there because it can drive my Dynaudio Excite X14 speakers, has three line-level inputs, and has outputs for every type of headphone, including electrostatics.

For these auditions, I transferred the Z10e to my floor system by connecting it to the output of HoloAudio's Serene preamplifier. This allowed me to alternate sources between two turntables and three DACs: Denafrips's Terminator Plus, HoloAudio's Spring 3, and Ferrum's Wandla, which I am reviewing elsewhere in this issue. The Z10e was powering HiFiMan's easy-to-drive, closed-back R10P planar magnetics, and I was surprised at first by how similar the two amplifiers sounded. Both presented an inviting tone character. The first "quantifiable" difference I noticed was the Z10e's slight warmth and slightly less-sharp focus. By slight, I mean that the difference in detail definition was easily noticeable but subtler than I anticipated. Extended comparative listening revealed the chief differences to be that the Feliks Envy played crisper and microscopically cleaner, with slightly tighter, more tuneful bass.

HeadAmp GS-X Mini

HeadAmp's GS-X Mini solid state headphone amplifier/preamplifier is similar to the Feliks Envy and the LTA Z10e in that it was designed to power even difficult-to-drive headphones like the Abyss 1266 and HiFiMan Susvara, but it is not similar in price: It sells for $1795. Alternating between my floor and desk systems, I've used the slender GS-X Mini for many hundreds of hours; the only times it makes me wish for something better are when I itch for some 300B pleasure, beyond the GS-X's straightforward presentation. I was curious how it would match up with Feliks's no-feedback 300B amp.

A fun part of audio reviewing is how rarely I know what will happen in a comparison. This one made me smile big, because damn me if the GS-X Mini didn't make HiFiMan's HE-R10P planar magnetic headphones sound like those Koss 950 electrostatics. As I wrote at the beginning of this column, *that's* the midrange I'm always looking for. Plus, the HeadAmp seemed more alive and microdynamically nuanced than it did with its usual partner, the Denafrips Aries II DAC. I suspect the HoloAudio Spring 3 DAC was the cause of this awakening, as jump, glow, and vigor are also its chief traits.

The GS-X Mini out-bassed its tubed competition playing Swedish singer, composer, and pipe organist Anna von Hausswolf's *The Truth, the Glow, the Fall (Live at Montreux)* (24/96 FLAC, Southern Lord/Qobuz). With the GS-X Mini, she came through like a giant of nature. It was fun watching how the HeadAmp's bass capabilities made this album feel bigger, stronger, and more dramatic than it did with the LTA and Feliks offerings.

It was less fun noticing how "solid state" the Mini sounded. After weeks with the Envy's luxurious-sounding no-feedback triodes, the GS-X Mini made music feel unnecessarily tight and tidy in a way that limited expansiveness and atmosphere. The Mini is extremely transparent and handles reverb very nicely, but it hits that old "transistor ceiling" when reproducing tone color, microtextures, and the empty spaces between sounds. But that shouldn't surprise anyone.

In contrast, what the Feliks Envy did with Anna was make her live performance seem *more live*—like I was there at the recording venue—than it did with the HeadAmp amp. The Envy made Anna von Hausswolff feel like a thinking, feeling person that was performing on the other side of the microphones.

Conclusion

I admit to being taken by the Feliks Envy's bold but tasteful style. It looks like it was designed to sit on a smart person's desk, beckoning constantly to be used. With every headphone I tried, it performed as though it had been engineered to present recordings in the most vivid manner possible, be 100% musically satisfying, and be the last headphone amplifier any of us might need to own.

My advice: Do not go to a CanJam without auditioning this extraordinarily high-performance machine. It's top-of-the-world wonderful.

My other advice: Try tripping into the fantastic world of electrostatic midrange with a Koss ESP/950 headphone kit. It comes with a lifetime warranty and may be all the headphone gear you'll ever need. ■

CONTACTS

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BRILLIANT CORNERS

BY ALEX HALBERSTADT

THIS ISSUE: In which Alex shares some favorite recordings from two of America's greatest songwriters.

Willie and Merle

I said to Hank Williams, how lonely does it get?
Hank Williams hasn't answered yet
But I hear him coughing all night long
Oh, a hundred floors above me in the tower of song
—**LEONARD COHEN,** "Tower of Song"

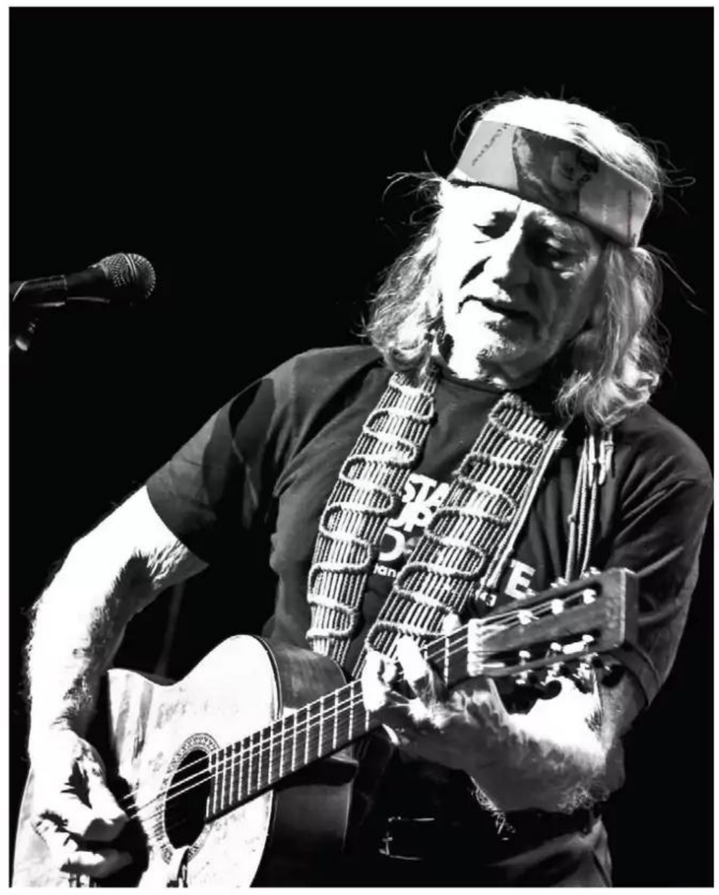
When I was a child growing up in Moscow in the 1970s, our pop-musical landscape was dominated by the so-called bards. They were Soviet counterparts to singer-songwriters from the West, and they sang literate, knowing lyrics while accompanying themselves on acoustic guitars. Even the word used to describe them—*bard'i*—was adapted from English. And because they sometimes sang about aspects of day-to-day life that were off limits in public, their music rarely appeared on records and was circulated mostly on fuzzy-sounding homemade tapes.

The best known among the bards were a Georgian-Armenian poet named Bulat Okudjava—who sang sentimental ballads about (chaste) romantic love, childhood friends, and The Great Patriotic War—and an altogether more daring performer named Vladimir Vysotsky. A keen social observer and a once-in-a-generation songwriter, Vysotsky came closer to speaking truthfully about life in the Soviet Union than anyone else of his stature. He repeatedly ran afoul of government censors—one newspaper excoriated him for spreading "criminality, alcoholism, and vice"—but he soon become too popular to silence. By the time the sole Soviet record company, Melodiya, finally released a handful of his songs in 1974, he was already the country's most famous singer. Millions knew his music from the unofficial tapes and from his films: Besides being a singer, Vysotsky was also a popular stage and screen actor. To get a sense of his place in Soviet culture, imagine some unlikely mix of John Lennon, Lenny Bruce, and Marlon Brando. Or better yet, play one of his songs for someone who grew up in that country and watch the inevitable tears.

After my family emigrated to New York, in 1980, I was on the lookout for a replacement for the bards. Still getting a grasp on English, I couldn't find enough storytelling in Dylan's obscure surrealism, and the singer-songwriters I'd encountered on the radio seemed cheesy and slight. (I hadn't yet discovered Joni Mitchell, and Leonard Cohen was hardly FM material.) Then one day a man who happened to look a lot like Peter Falk on *Columbo* showed up at our apartment. He was taking my mother on a date. I'll call him Howard. He wore a belted tan trench coat and said he owned a record-and-cassette warehouse. "What kind of music do you like?" Howard asked me. I was 11 or 12 and didn't know what to say. But I'd watched a few episodes of *Dukes of Hazzard* on our new preowned Toshiba TV and was riveted by the show's theme song, and to my surprise I blurted out "country!" When Howard came over again a few weeks later to take my mother on another date, he dug two handfuls of cassettes out of his coat pockets and put them on the table. The names on the plastic spines—Hank Williams, Willie Nelson, Johnny Paycheck, Loretta Lynn—meant nothing to me.

I spent the following weeks listening to the tapes on my boombox. What I enjoyed most about them were the stories, the accessible but never simplistic language, the broad humor, and the high-sentiment singing. That lyrics were country music's crucial component reminded me of the bards, as did the songs' interest in the underdog. (I hadn't yet discovered that lots of other Soviet immigrants had made this connection and become country music fans.) And so, in the brown-brick wastes of public housing in Queens, New York, I fell in love with the music of Appalachia and the American South, most of which had

Vladimir Vysotsky.



WILLIE NELSON PHOTO BY PAMELA SMITH CC BY 2.0.

been recorded before I was born some 5500 miles away.

Of course, it's no simple thing to pry apart music and its social context, and I suppose my pure love for country depended on being able to hear it with fresh ears, unencumbered by notions about its fans and their politics. I'm not sure it would have mattered. In country, I found the most sophisticated storytelling in popular music, as well as the keenest psychological insights and some of the most heartfelt playing. As a listener and fan, I formed the deepest relationships with its performers. And, to a large extent, after years of delving into (and writing about) other genres of music, I continue to hear it the same way.

What continues to surprise me is how unfamiliar this music remains to many otherwise curious listeners, both in the US and abroad. Too often, when I've referred to Merle Haggard as one of the finest American songwriters or suggested that George Jones is a singer on par with Sinatra, I've encountered a smirk or an eyebrow arched in disbelief. (To see what I mean, try to find a mention of a country artist in this magazine—and no, I'm *not* talking about Lyle Lovett, who has the same relationship to country that frozen burritos have to serious cooking.) It goes without saying that this reflects not on the music's virtues but on these listeners' provincialism. Ignoring a musical treasure lying on one's geographical doorstep begs the question of why it is being ignored.

But that's a question for another time. Here, I'd like to talk about some favorite records by a pair of country singer-songwriters of the LP era. (This is a distinction worth making. The Carter Family, Bob Wills, and Hank Williams, three of country's pioneering figures, made their most important work before the extended-play, high-fidelity goodies of the 12" disk were widely available.)

Willie Nelson and Merle Haggard became famous not only for their music but for the ways in which they rebelled against the Nashville record industry and won. Their rebellion changed the business, and the music itself, for good. In this they were not unique—this column could easily have been about Dolly Parton and Waylon Jennings, or Johnny Cash and Loretta Lynn. More importantly, these records, which are full of stories about people born in circumstances as unremarkable as my own, number among the most compelling ever pressed (or etched) onto plastic—as affecting, delightful, and funny today as the day they were released.

Willie Nelson

Willie Nelson has collaborated with everyone from Wynton Marsalis to Kid Rock to Kermit the Frog, but the heart of his recorded output is a series of tightly conceived concept albums that have little precedent in pop music. It took him a while to get there. Despite being the writer of hits like "Crazy" for Patsy Cline and "Hello Walls" for Faron Young, Nelson couldn't break through as a singer in an industry that swaddled his songs in maudlin arrangements and corny productions. While living in a Nashville trailer park above a cemetery and drinking heavily, he became so despondent that one night he got up from his barstool at Tootsie's Orchid Lounge and lay down in the middle of Broadway so that a car would run him over. It was a slow night and there was hardly any traffic, so eventually he went back to Tootsie's for another drink.

He didn't find his way until the early 1970s, when he moved to Austin, Texas, and connected with a more eclectic, hippie audience. Nelson turned what had been obstacles to mainstream success—a nasal, reedy voice, jazz-inflected phrasing, and a tendency to sing behind the beat—into the trademarks of his inimitable sound. And then there's his elegant and vastly underrated guitar playing, which layers

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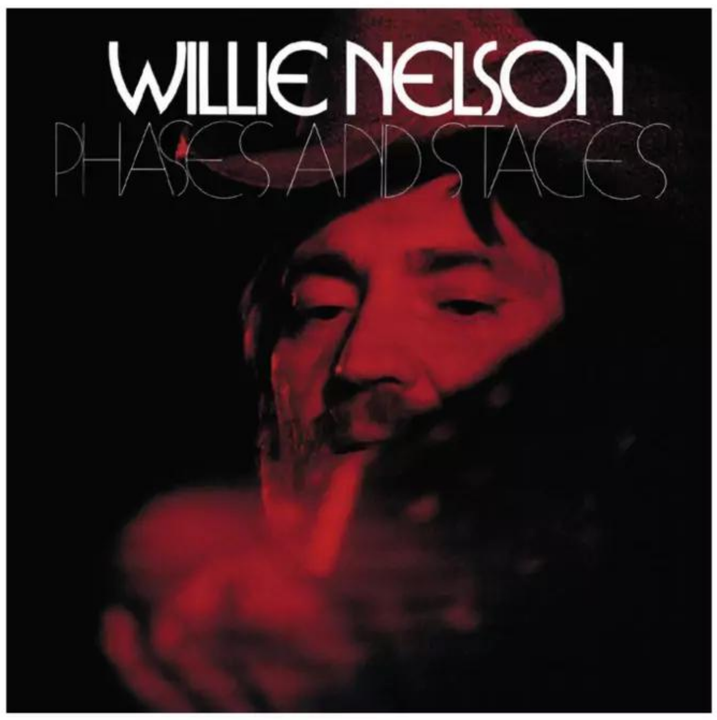
the sounds of Django Reinhardt, Lightnin' Hopkins, and even flamenco onto what had once been called hillbilly music.

***Phases and Stages* (1974)**
Having left Nashville, Nelson signed with Atlantic Records after meeting soul producer Jerry Wexler at a party. Their second collaboration, after the wonderful *Shotgun Willie* failed to do much business, was a story of a divorce. The woman tells her side on the record's first side, the man on the second. In songs like "Bloody Mary Morning" and "I Still Can't Believe You're Gone," Nelson writes about heartbreak, guilt, and desperation with a subtlety and insight uncommon in any genre; it's as though Raymond Carver decided to pick up a guitar and set his stories to music. And that music: Playing with the crew from Alabama's Muscle Shoals Sound Studio, Nelson mothballed Nashville's countrypolitan strings in favor of a spare, hard-edged sound rooted in 1940s honkytonk and the blues, reflecting the eclecticism of his newfound audience.

***Red Headed Stranger* (1975)**
Another concept album, about a fugitive who's on the run after shooting his wife and her lover, *Red Headed Stranger* was Nelson's



commercial breakthrough. He and his longtime band—featuring his sister Bobbie on piano, Mickey Raphael on harmonica, and Paul English on drums—put down a performance so spare that Columbia executives initially thought the final tape was a demo. A mix of originals and covers, it yielded a massive hit in Nelson's sublime reading of Fred Rose's 1946 chestnut "Blue Eyes Crying in the Rain" and transformed Jeannie Seely's minor 1973 hit "Can I Sleep in Your Arms" into a chilling nighttime confession. For the first time on a Nelson album, the music feels entirely his own,

unfolding and breathing freely. Anyone doubting Nelson's musicianship should listen to the 2000 reissue, which contains his rendition of Christian Petzold's "Minuet in G" (mistakenly attributed on the back cover to Bach). And the title track may contain the best legal analysis on a country record: "You can't hang a man for shooting a woman who's trying to steal his horse."

***The IRS Tapes: Who'll Buy My Memories* (1991)**
In 1990, while Nelson was golfing in Hawaii, IRS agents seized most of his assets,

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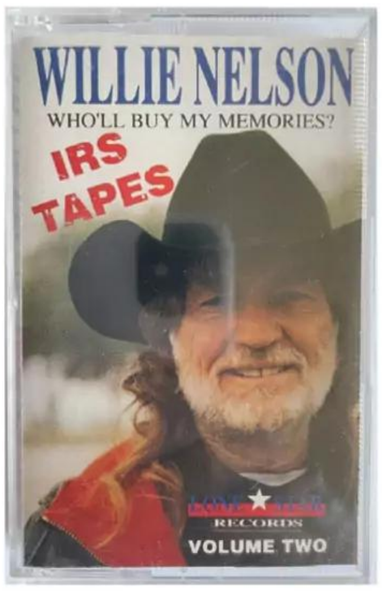
including several homes and a farm, and presented him with a $16.7 million bill for years of unpaid taxes. During the ordeal, Nelson's daughter and his lawyer took turns hiding his guitar, Trigger, from the eagle-eyed feds. "We try to work with taxpayers," an IRS spokeswoman told *The New York Times* the following year, "and if we have to come up with some creative payment plan, that's what we're going to do." The creative payment plan included this double album. Presumably to cut costs, it features just Nelson and his guitar and was sold through television ads before being shipped to stores. The set list includes many of Nelson's choicest originals, and the titles alone—"Opportunity to Cry," "Pretend I Never Happened," "Wake Me When It's Over"—speak to the mood. And if at times Nelson sounds like someone who's been crying, it only adds to the rawness of the performances. *The IRS Tapes* wasn't pop music's first court-mandated masterpiece—Marvin Gaye's *Here, My Dear* comes to mind—but if anything it sounds even fresher today.



***Teatro* (1998)**

Pairing Nelson with U2 producer Daniel Lanois may have seemed like an odd decision, but the album they made together turned out to be both strange and sublime. The third collaborator is Emmylou Harris, the greatest harmony singer known to humankind, and the interplay of the two voices is spellbinding. Lanois surrounds the singers with low-key Latin percussion and drenches them in reverb. Nelson and Harris sound like they're singing in the black coldness of space.

Yet like the surprising pairing of blue cheese and sweet wine, it somehow works. The songs are mostly originals from the early 1960s, and the production brings out their cosmic, gothic inflections, reminding us that for all his mainstream appeal, Nelson writes some pretty weird material. *Teatro* was recorded in an old movie palace in Oxnard, California. If you do a little digging on YouTube, you can find a sweet little film of the session by director Wim Wenders that's well deserving of your time.

Merle Haggard

Unlike Willie Nelson, Merle Haggard never recorded a hit duet with Julio Iglesias or appeared on *Miami Vice*. His appeal remained more squarely ensconced within the formal language and fandom of country. Yet Haggard is the finer and more versatile songwriter; on that front, his only real competition is Hank Williams. Part of the reason may have been Haggard's lifelong obsession with music history. When I interviewed him in 2000, ostensibly about a new record he'd recorded for a punk label, he mostly wanted to talk about Louis Armstrong, Bix Beiderbecke, Dolly Parton, and his favorite lineup of Bob Wills's Texas Playboys.

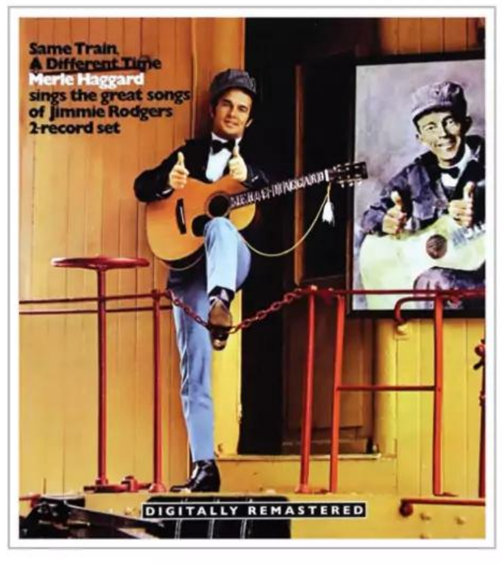
Haggard's early life gave him plenty to write about. As the chorus of "Mama Tried" reminds us, he really did turn 21 in prison. While incarcerated in San Quentin, he learned that his first wife, Leona Hobbs, was expecting another man's child. Seven or eight years later, he wrote about the experience in a song titled "My Ramona."

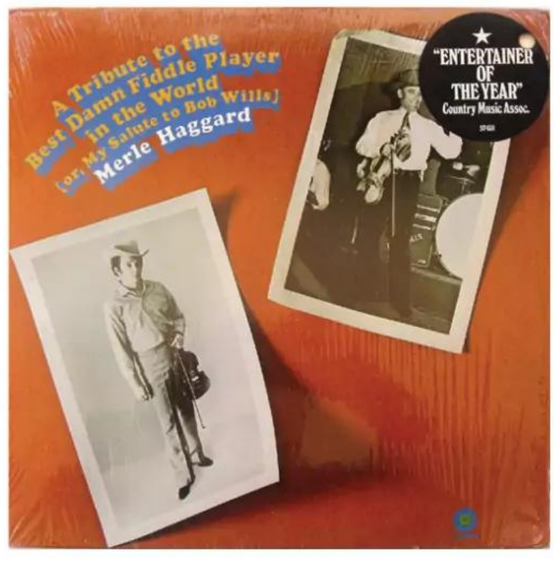
Everybody's talking bad about Ramona
They say she's changed a lot since I've been gone
They say she may not be too glad to see me
Because Ramona doesn't know I'm coming home
But everybody's wrong about Ramona
They're just going by the way she's acting now
I just can't believe the things they say about her
Because Ramona knows the things I won't allow

Of course, we know that the narrator is deceiving himself; he has lost Ramona. That's the perfect thing about the song: We know something about him that he doesn't yet know about himself. "Ramona is really Leona," Haggard told me in 2000. "A lot of it is made to fit the song, but it was about real things."

Take a listen to "My Ramona," because it has nearly everything that made Haggard so brilliant. There's the singing: surprisingly supple and high, without a drop of the machismo and bluster that sometimes pass for conviction in country music. And there's no sentimentality: only a half-sob when he sings Ramona's name during the second chorus, and a bit of melody he hums at the end, which somehow make it understood that we're listening to a man speaking to himself in his mind.

The child of Okies, Haggard evaded Nashville's pull by largely staying away, remaining close to his birthplace near Bakersfield, California, which also produced Buck Owens. The Bakersfield sound was heavily amplified and fast, but what set Haggard apart was a melancholy disposition and a novelist's empathy for his subjects. And though he lofted an astonishing 38 singles to the top of the country charts, many of his finest songs are the quieter album tracks that reward close, repeated listening.





***The Legend of Bonnie and Clyde* (1968)**
Though it's difficult to choose one from among Haggard's superb early LPs, this one is particularly sticky, featuring "My Ramona," the driving title track, and the timeless "Today I Started Loving You Again," which Haggard reportedly wrote while his wife Bonnie Owens stepped out to buy him a hamburger. When she returned, she wrote down the words he dictated to her on the brown paper bag. Listen to the lyrics; I dare you to find a superfluous word. Haggard had excellent taste in musicians, and here the playing of his lead guitarist Roy Nichols is a master class in creativity and economy. On CD and streaming services, this album is often paired with the same year's *Sing Me Back Home*, a lovely choice.

***Same Train, A Different Time: Merle Haggard Sings the Great Songs of Jimmie Rodgers* (1969)**
In the midst of a steady stream of #1 singles, Haggard released a double-album tribute to country's first superstar, Jimmie Rodgers, who was famous for his yodeling and died in 1934. The care and imagination Haggard infused into this commercially bizarre gesture brought the material to scintillating life. Rodgers's songs—"Waiting for a Train," "Peach Picking Time in Georgia," "Hobo's Meditation"—sound liberated from the murk of the Depression-era shellac and offer more than a glimpse into how audaciously modern they must have sounded to listeners of the era. The album, and Haggard's spoken-word introductions, reveal him to be an intellectual as interested in the history of American music as in songwriting and the business of stardom. Bonus tip: Listen for Telecaster master James Burton positively setting fire to the dobro.

***A Tribute to the Best Damn Fiddle Player in the World (or, My Salute to Bob Wills)* (1970)**
After the outsized Rodgers tribute, Haggard's project of reanimating the past took an even more surprising turn. His plan to record with the great Western Swing bandleader Bob Wills was derailed when Wills suffered a stroke after the session's first day. Regrouping, in a few months Haggard taught himself the fiddle, assembled six surviving members of the Texas Playboys, and took over as both bandleader and lead vocalist. Western Swing is played in dance halls, and the sheer joy and kick that Haggard's band and the Playboys elicit from World War II–era standards like "Roly Poly," "Time Changes Everything," and "Old-Fashioned Love" is delightful to behold, and the opposite of a reverential exercise in nostalgia. Jerry Wexler once told me that seeing Haggard and the Playboys with Willie Nelson in San Francisco was the greatest night of music in his life.

***Down Every Road* (1996)**
Most box sets tend to be paperweights for the compulsive and should be avoided like needless dental work. But this four-CD release, capturing more than 30 years of Haggard's music, doesn't have a single dull moment. Especially revelatory is the stylistic freedom and wintry sentiment of the later songs, from the second half of the 1970s and the 1980s. Has anyone written better than Haggard does on "Kern River," "Big City," and "Here in Frisco"? The twin guitar intro to "Ramblin' Fever" may be my favorite 30 seconds on record. Then there's Haggard and Willie Nelson's inspired duet on Townes Van Zandt's "Pancho and Lefty," which suddenly made every other version unnecessary. Besides a couple of duet albums, the two singers shared a penchant for marrying often, poker, the buds of the cannabis plant, and pitch-black jokes. Haggard once told an interviewer, "Willie Nelson's the one who told me the reason it costs so much to get divorced is because it's worth it." ■

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SPIN DOCTOR

BY MICHAEL TREI

THIS ISSUE: Durawood and Malachite Silver moving coil cartridges from Lithuanian manufacturer Aidas.

Two moving coil cartridges from Lithuania

In 1985, I visited what was then known as Soviet Estonia with my family. My paternal grandparents, Mimi and Pop, had emigrated to the US from this small Baltic country in 1929. Fifty-six years later, after more than a decade of rejection, the family was granted permission by the Soviet authorities to visit our ancestral homeland, and the whole family, including Mimi, made the trek. (Pop died in 1962.)

Once we were there, we were more or less free to move around in the capital city Tallinn, but leaving the city was strictly forbidden, except as part of a planned group excursion with our KGB minders—er, "Intourist guides."

Mimi was originally from an island off the west coast of Estonia called Saaremaa. In 1985, it was home to several military facilities, so a visit there was off the table. To get around this, Mimi set up camp inside her room at the Viru Hotel in Tallinn while dozens of long, lost Estonian relatives made the journey to visit her (and the rest of the family) there.

In her room, she doled out the blue jeans, Western music, and other American desirables we had managed to sneak across the border. Each of us had been tasked with bringing two big suitcases filled with all sorts of American goodies. After all, every American tourist needs five pairs of new Levis in various sizes and a pile of candy for a two-week trip, right? When we arrived on the ferry from Finland, the only thing the humorless Soviet border guards confiscated was a vinyl copy of Jesus Christ Superstar.

As Mimi held court at the Viru, my siblings and I headed out into the city to look for interesting stuff. I was already an audiophile, so I was eager to discover the local high-end audio scene, if there was one. If there was, it was well-hidden—not for consumption by visiting Americans or, apparently, the general public. There *were* a few hard (ie, Western) currency stores where you could find some Western mainstream electronics—more what you might find at Crazy Eddie than at a high-end store like Lyric HiFi—selling for about 10 times the New York City street price. A lot of it, I'd heard, was purchased overseas by Soviet Navy sailors to make some extra cash when they returned home. Few Estonians had access to foreign currency, so this gear was out of their reach.

For regular folks, buying a hi-fi meant saving up for Soviet-bloc offerings from brands like Radiotehnika and Vega, churned out domestically for the masses. Most of the bars in town were using what

The Corvette EP-003 turntable.

appeared to be a loose knockoff of the Yamaha NS-1000 called the Radiotehnika S-90, which, though the manufacturer was based in Latvia, apparently was made in Czechoslovakia. Today, the S-90 seems to have a bit of a cult following—for example, a small company in Estonia will rebuild them to modern aesthetic standards.[1] But whether this new enthusiasm is because they were genuinely good or just due to nostalgia, I can't really say.

Incidentally, Radiotehnika, which was founded in 1927 as VEF Radiotehnika RRR, is still around, and they still make a couple of models—the floorstanding SM-300 and S-400M—that closely resemble the S-90.

Anything more exotic than that was elusive, but what I later learned that there *was* a vibrant underground audio scene, with talented designers pulling whatever strings they could to design and produce quality equipment. One of the first Soviet-made components many considered high end was an amplifier called the Brig 001, designed by Anatoly Likhnitsky and Alla Kalyaeva in the mid-1970s. This was followed by the wild-looking

The Radiotehnika S-90 from the 1980s and today's Radiotehnika SM-300.

1 See vaatcraft.com/s90.

Corvette EP-003 turntable, with its distinctive chrome pool-ball tonearm bearing, and the Amfiton-U-002 amplifier, designed in 1983 by the late Vladimir Shushurin, who went on to become Vladimir Lamm.

All this changed at the start of the 1990s, when the Soviet Union collapsed and the exchange of both ideas and goods between East and West suddenly became much easier. Some of the Eastern bloc's more talented designers, including Shushurin/Lamm and Victor Khomenko, who co-founded Balanced Audio Technology, had already managed to move West before the wall fell, but many more could now gain recognition beyond the Iron Curtain.

Fast forward 32 years, and products from former Eastern European countries like Slovenia, Serbia, Czech Republic, and Poland are widely available worldwide. But high-end gear from the former Soviet states remains less common. The three Baltic states—Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania—are exceptions. They have sent us some truly serious high-end brands, including Estelon loudspeakers and Degritter record cleaning machines, both from Estonia, and Reed turntables and Audio Solutions loudspeakers from Lithuania. You can add Lithuania-made Aidas cartridges to that list.

Aidas

Aidas Svazas started repairing and modifying cartridges in Lithuania more than 25 years ago, creating his first entirely new design, the AS-1, in 2010.[2] Like most smaller high-end cartridge manufacturers, Aidas relies on tried-and-true parts from outside suppliers like Namiki, Ogura, and Fritz Geiger. Much as loudspeaker manufacturers use drivers built to their specifications by Scan-Speak, SEAS, and so on, Aidas uses Adamant Namiki of Japan to manufacture parts for their Mk2 generators to Aidas's specifications. Aidas cartridges are assembled at their facility in Kaunas, Lithuania.

Phono cartridge manufacturers often differentiate among their various models based on the stylus profile and cantilever material. Aidas, though, uses the same basic generator for almost all their cartridges, all also fitted with the same boron cantilever, AlNiCo5 magnet, and nude MicroLine stylus. What sets the various models apart from each other are what many would consider fine tuning: the material used for the cartridge body and the wire used to wind the coils.

Aidas uses four types of wire in their coils, so the lineup is split into four series. The CU series uses pure copper wire. The AG-CU series steps that up to silver-plated copper. The AU-CU series uses gold-plated copper wire. Finally, there's the AU Series, which uses wire made of pure gold.

Aidas isn't the first company to use gold wire for their cartridge coils. Still, I have often wondered about this application, seeing as gold has both higher resistance and higher mass than silver or copper. I asked Aidas's Donatas Tamošiūnas why they use gold. He said that their gold wire has a slightly more transparent yet relaxed sound. He also said that their gold wire is slightly thicker than their copper and silver wire and they use fewer turns on the coil to compensate for those physical and electrical disadvantages. That also means that AU-series models have a slightly lower output voltage.

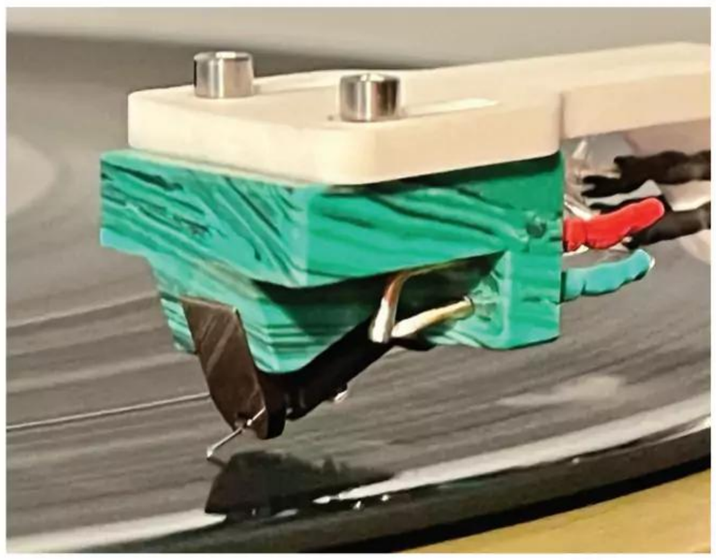
The most visually striking difference among models is material used to fashion the cartridge bodies, which ranges from several varieties of layered wood to a manufactured stone-and-resin composite called Tru-Stone. Some Aidas cartridges even use ivory from ancient woolly mammoth tusks. Where they find woolly mammoth tusks, I couldn't tell you.

Pricing is determined entirely by the type of coil wire used. CU-series models cost $4595, both AG-CU– and AU-CU–series models cost $5850. AU-series models cost $8650. In addition to these, Aidas makes two "baby" cartridge models, which use a trimmed-down body and lighter samarium-cobalt magnets to reduce mass, making them a better match for certain tonearms.

Aidas sent me two cartridges to audition for this column: the Durawood from the CU series, which has a body made from a multilayered wood ($4595), and the Malachite Silver from the AG-CU series, which has a green Tru-Stone body. Both are visually striking, displaying a handmade, artisan flair. Having these two models on hand allowed me to compare the changes wrought by the wire and body differences, but only cumulatively: I could not differentiate between the effects of the body material and the wiring. Jeff Fox of Aidas importer Notable Audio says they plan to create a guide outlining the sonic impact of the various body materials and wiring types, to provide at least some guidance.

Remember: both these cartridges have the same MicroRidge stylus, boron cantilever, double suspension (hence the same 1.9gm tracking force and 12µm/mN lateral compliance), the same 0.3mV output voltage, the same 0.03mm wire thickness, and the same 5 ohm internal resistance. The only parameter that varies (other than the body and wire materials) is the cartridge weight: Tru-Stone is heavier than wood, and the Malachite Silver is specified as weighing 1.8gm more than the Durawood. According to my measurements, however, the weight difference between the two cartridges was closer to 3gm because my

2 See Michael Fremer's take on the Aidas Gala Gold LE in Analog Corner #335, at stereophile.com/content/analog-corner-305-degritter-record-cleaner-aidas-gala-gold-le-cartridge.



Top left: The Brig 001 integrated amplifier. **Above:** The Aidas Malachite Silver, which has silver-plated copper wire and a Tru-Stone body.

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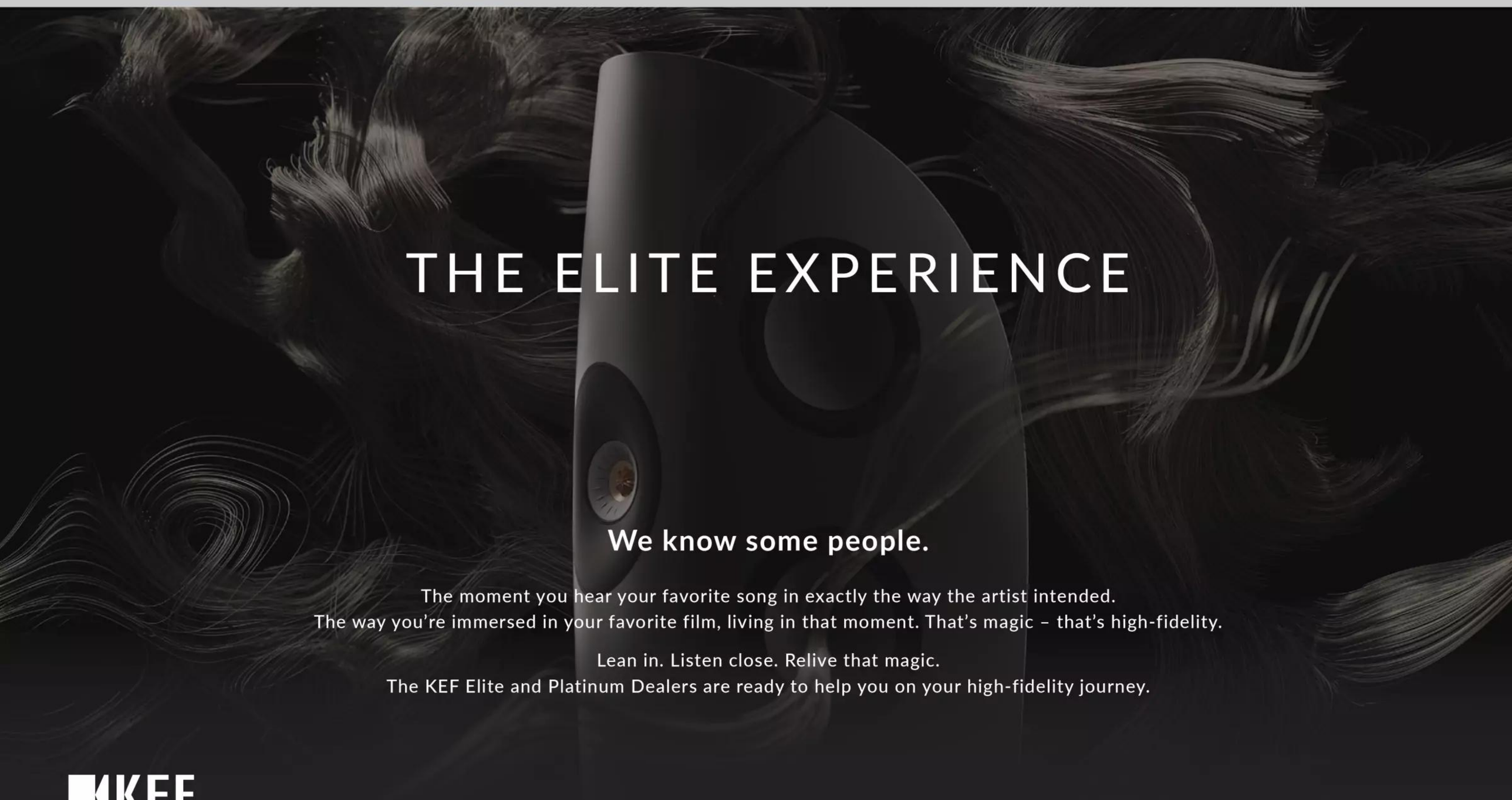

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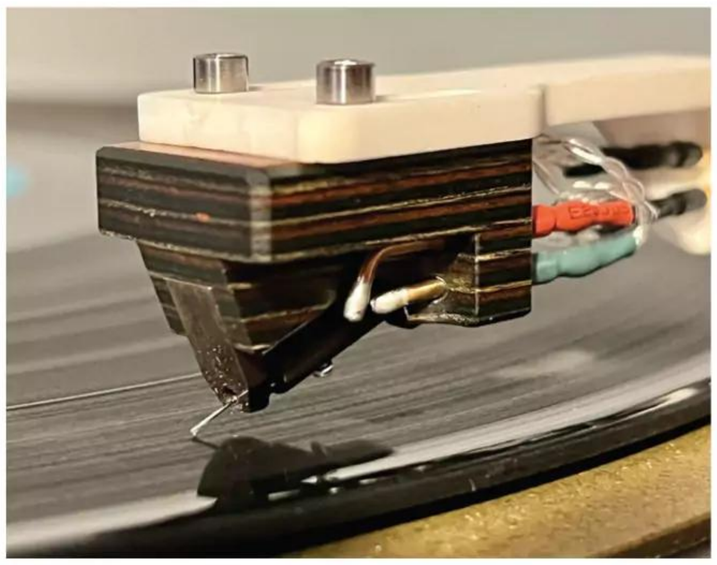


Above: Finished and unfinished Durawoods, with a body of multilayered wood and copper coil wire. **Below right:** The Durawood with a penny on top.

Malachite Silver sample weighed about 1.6gm more than the spec sheet indicates.

Setting up the Aidas cartridges was straightforward due to the M2.5 threaded screw holes, cantilevers that are perfectly square with the generator and body, and stylus rake angles that are pretty much spot on when the cartridge bodies are set level. The only difficulty arises from the lack of a stylus guard; you need to be extra careful to avoid snagging the stylus.

I installed both cartridges in Korf HS-A02 headshells on the Korf TA-SF9R tonearm, which allowed me to switch between them in a few seconds with just a simple adjustment to the tracking force to compensate for the weight difference. The turntable was my SME Model 30/2, and the phono preamp was the CH Precision P1. Aidas recommends a medium-mass arm for the Durawood and a medium-to-heavy–mass arm for the Malachite Silver. The 28gm Korf arm falls into the heavy category, but a quick check with Korf's online compliance calculator told me that both cartridges should work well with the arm, without any low-frequency resonance problems, and this was indeed the case.

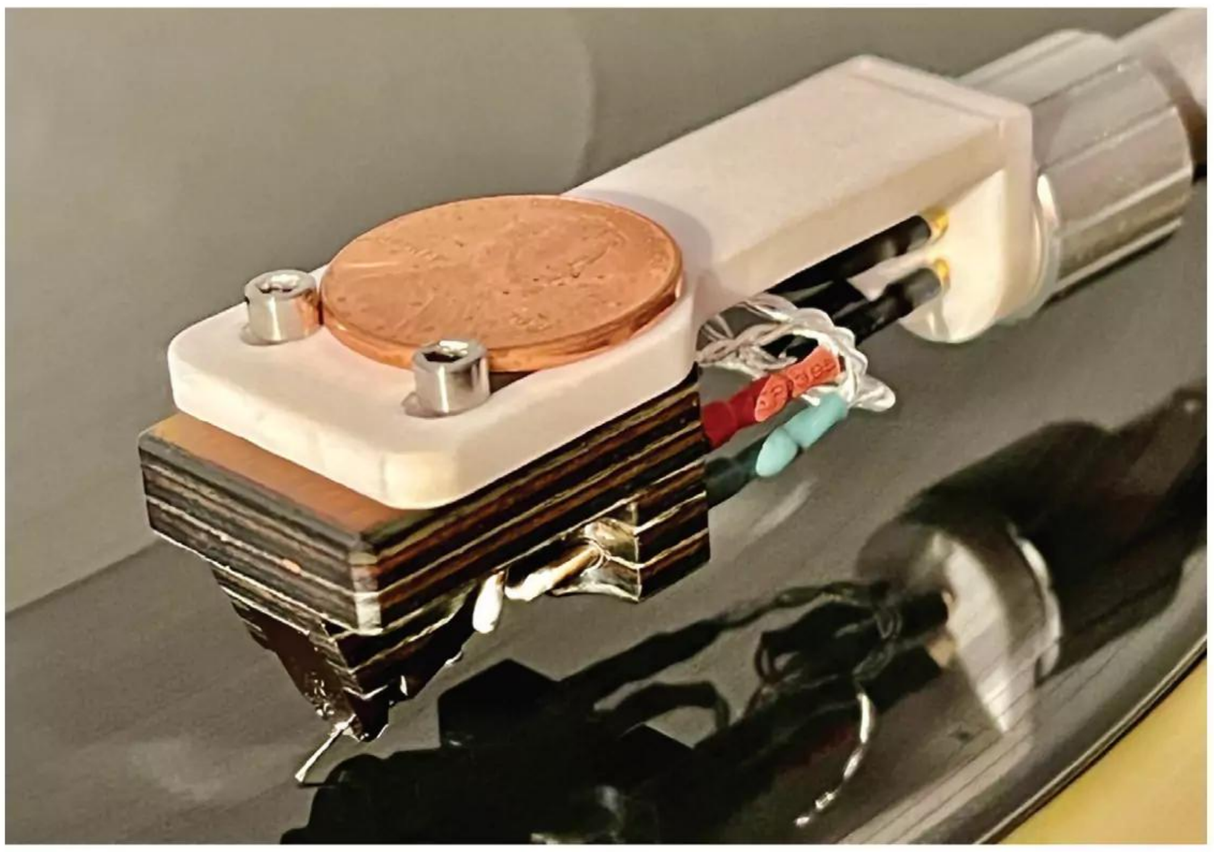
Aidas recommends a resistive load between 100 and 1000 ohms—a frustratingly wide range. Luckily, the CH Precision P1 phono preamp was on hand: I was able to use its cartridge-loading wizard to test several steps between those extremes; the P1 generated a response readout and accuracy score for each. The most accurate response resulted with a 164 ohms load, but I found I preferred the slightly livelier sound I got at around 250 ohms. On the other hand, the cartridge's 5 ohm internal impedance makes it a good match for the P1's transimpedance input, so that is how I used it most of the time.

After giving both cartridges some playing time over a few days to settle in, I started my focused listening with the copper-wire Durawood. The first thing that struck me was how quietly this cartridge sits in the groove. Even on records that are far from perfect, I found myself turning the volume up before the music started, wondering if I'd hit mute or inadvertently switched inputs on the preamp, only to have the music burst forth from the silence. Minimal groove noise is usually a good indicator of a well-aligned stylus, sitting square and true in the groove.

To begin, I played bassist Art Davis's 1995 album *A Time Remembered* (Jazz Planet 4001-1). Davis pulled in some heavyweights for this session: Herbie Hancock on piano and Marvin "Smitty" Smith on drums—but Ravi Coltrane's sax playing shines brightest here. Coltrane's playing on tenor and soprano sax displays a maturity that echoes his legendary father's earlier work. This is a great recording, both tonally and dynamically, but the soundstaging can sound a bit odd on some tracks, Smitty's drums spread wide across the full width of a broad soundstage. With the Durawood, on the track "Everybody's Doing It," Coltrane's soprano had a reaching quality I appreciated, which never devolved into screechiness the way a soprano sax can: It remained prominent but smooth. Davis plays a bowed solo on this track, which demonstrated just how embodied and rich the Durawood's bass can be when given the right material.

When I swapped in the Malachite Silver, the sound remained similar in overall tonal flavor but with a noticeable step up in microdynamics and power. Playing the Chesky reissue of Earl Wild's recording of the Rachmaninoff Piano Concerto No.2 (Chesky CR2), first made for Reader's Digest Records (RDA 29-A), the Malachite Silver wrung just a bit more dynamic power than the Durawood managed, though both were very impressive, sailing through this tough-to-track LP with ease. This early Chesky reissue was cut at Masterdisk using a DMM lathe, and the size of the runout groove on side 2 is something to behold—almost 2/3rds of the playing area, due to the tight DMM spacing—but the dynamics are still there.

An obvious competitor for these cartridges is one of my longtime references, the Dynavector DRT XV-1S, which costs exactly the same as the Malachite Silver. The XV-1S excels in dynamic slam and power in a way that the Aidas cartridges approach but cannot quite match; the Aidases, though, compensate in many ways. The Durawood digs a little deeper than the XV-1S can manage, drawing out the beauty of tone in many instruments, and the Malachite Silver combines that same tonal richness with a little more of the Dynavector's slam. A British 45rpm, 12" remix single of the Talking Heads song "The Lady Don't Mind" (12EMI 5520) pressed this point home, sounding amazing through the Durawood, with voices and percussion flying around the room. But when I switched to the Malachite Silver, I felt a tiny bit more like I just wanted to get up and dance.



A penny on the headshell?

Putting a penny on the headshell may sound like something a teenager would do in 1970 to stop their copy of *Led Zeppelin II* from skipping on their BSR changer, but does it have a legitimate purpose with a high-end turntable?

While discussing my Aidas findings with Editor Jim Austin, he wondered how much of the sonic difference I heard between the Durawood and Malachite Silver was due to the difference in weight rather than to the actual materials. To test this, I added mass to the Durawood's headshell. A shiny new US penny weighs 2.5gm. A small blob of Blu-Tack to hold the penny in place made up the 0.1gm difference. Now I could swap between cartridges without adjusting anything, and any sonic differences would be due only to the body and coil-wire materials.

Playing "Spanish Jack" from Willy DeVille's album *Miracle* (A&M SP-5177), the cartridges sounded very similar. The Malachite Silver, though, displayed a subtle but undeniable extra sense of life. Drummer Jamie Lane's loud snare drum thwacks near the end of the song came across with a just bit more explosive power, and the reverb tails on the drum gave an enhanced sense of space and openness. In addition, throughout the song, Mark Knopfler's acoustic guitar sounded a bit more full-bodied, as if his guitar was the next step up in size.

I repeated the comparison with the Art Davis and Talking Heads records I used earlier, and results were the same. Even when weight-matched, the Malachite Silver added a little more jump and spark to the sound while remaining smooth and transparent.

Based on these results, I'm going to call nay on Jim's idea. I'm convinced that the differences between the Durawood and the Malachite Silver are due to the changes in coil wire and/or cartridge body material rather than mere differences in weight.

Conclusion

With top-line moving coil cartridges pushing ever deeper into five-figure territory—and well beyond[3]—a pair of cartridges priced a few hundred bucks either side of $5000 seems almost reasonable, especially when you take into account that these are hand-built creations. Both of these cartridges are easy to like, with a smooth, refined sound and gobs of detail and precision. The Malachite Silver sounds similar to the Durawood but adds some dynamic impact and slam. These are both great-sounding cartridges, but if you can swing the additional $1255, the Malachite Silver is a clear step up.

There is plenty of competition in this price range, but the Aidas cartridges hold their own sonically while making a visual statement that makes most other cartridges look boring.

Lithuania isn't Estonia, but it is a close neighbor, which makes me a little bit proud to see how far the Baltic States have managed to come from the dreary place I visited nearly 40 years ago. I'm looking forward to seeing more great audio companies coming out of the Baltics in the years to come. ■

3 The three cartridges in darTZeel's Founder's Series cost CHF42,424.24, CHF53,535.35, and CHF1,000,000.01. The Swiss franc is now worth more than the US dollar, so that's well into five figures and beyond. It's hard to take that last number seriously (especially with the added penny), but one of those cartridges—I'm not sure which—attracted a lot of attention at last year's High End Munich.

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SASHA MATSON

Wilson Audio Specialties Sasha V

LOUDSPEAKER

Wilson Audio's new Sasha V loudspeaker (that's "V" as in victory, not "five") extends the line that began in 2009 with the debut of the Sasha 1 model. The installation manual includes a page titled "Sasha Evolution," with elegant line drawings of the various versions of the Sasha loudspeaker—now four—which were preceded by the two-box WATT/Puppy combo, which dates from 1989. The Wilson Audio Specialties Sasha V ($48,900/pair) replaces the prior Sasha model, the Sasha DAW, in the Wilson lineup.

The hefty, floorstanding Sasha V maintains a close family resemblance. The new Sasha's width and height are almost identical, logging 14 1/2" and 45 1/16", respectively. The cabinets gain an inch in depth and now measure 23 15/16". The cabinets' subtle beveling is slightly different; probably only recent Sasha owners would notice. Extra thickness in the cabinets adds 9lb for a total of 245lb per speaker. The cabinet's sculptural elements are enhanced by a range of available automotive-grade paint finishes; the review pair is handsomely kitted out in Satin Oak Green with Slate Gray grilles.

The changes made by Wilson designer/CEO Daryl Wilson and his team are mainly on the inside. New to the Sasha line is a 7" rear-vented paper-pulp composite midrange driver that Wilson designates with the term QuadraMag, first deployed in the costlier Chronosonic XVX model and used in several models since. Also used in other V-series speakers but new to Sasha is the 1" doped-silk Convergent Synergy Carbon tweeter, which employs a printed carbon rear-wave chamber. Twin, 8" paper-pulp–composite woofers, the same as those utilized in the Sasha DAW, complete the driver complement.

The V in "Sasha V" and in the other Wilson "V" speakers—the XVX,[1] Alexx V,[2] and Alexia V[3]—indicates Wilson's proprietary V-material, which is employed alongside older proprietary cabinet materials designated X and S. Other upgrades include the Acoustic Diode footers (previously offered as an option), and new AudioCapX-WA copper capacitors in the crossovers; Wilson now manufacturers capacitors in-house, so they can make exactly the capacitor needed in each speaker, including the Sasha V's.

In a Facetime conversation, I asked Daryl Wilson if the Sasha V contained "trickle-down" technology. He responded, "I've heard that phrase a lot. That's not the way we innovate and develop. We don't wait to just put something only in our largest loudspeaker. Whatever we are working on will be distilled and used no matter where it fits and then used again. Our new copper capacitors were ready now, so we used them in the Sasha V. We didn't hold them back."

Published specifications for the new Sasha V reflect a mix of constancy and change. A few items stand out. There is a modest increase in the upward frequency extension, to 32kHz, surely due to the new tweeter. Specified low-end extension remains the same as for the Sasha DAW, at 20Hz. Specified nominal impedance is 4 ohms, with a minimum of 2.36 ohms, at 82Hz; this is very similar behavior to that of the Sasha DAW model. The capacity of partnering amplifiers for Wilson loudspeakers has always been something to pay attention to. Helpfully, Wilson includes a full impedance curve in the installation manual. The specifications state a reduction in the rated sensitivity to 88dB/W/m (equivalent to 91dB/2.83V/m for a 4 ohm–rated speaker) for the Sasha Vs, from a rating of 91dB for the Sasha DAWs. I asked Daryl Wilson what might account for this. "Overall frequency response, if you were to average it, is the same," he replied. "Because the measurement was frequency-specific, at 1kHz, that one measurement was a bit higher on the Sasha DAW than for the Sasha V."

Beginning in 1993 with their Grand SLAMM Series, Daryl's dad, company founder David Wilson, started using custom-made resin-based composite materials of varied density and resonant properties in Wilson speaker enclosures. Wilson's proprietary materials are extremely dense and heavy, and they can be machined. In the Sasha V, Wilson's "X-material" is used most, employed in the cabi-

1 See stereophile.com/content/wilson-audio-specialties-chronosonic-xvx-loudspeaker.
2 See stereophile.com/content/wilson-audio-specialties-alexx-v-loudspeaker.
3 See stereophile.com/content/wilson-audio-specialties-alexia-v-loudspeaker.

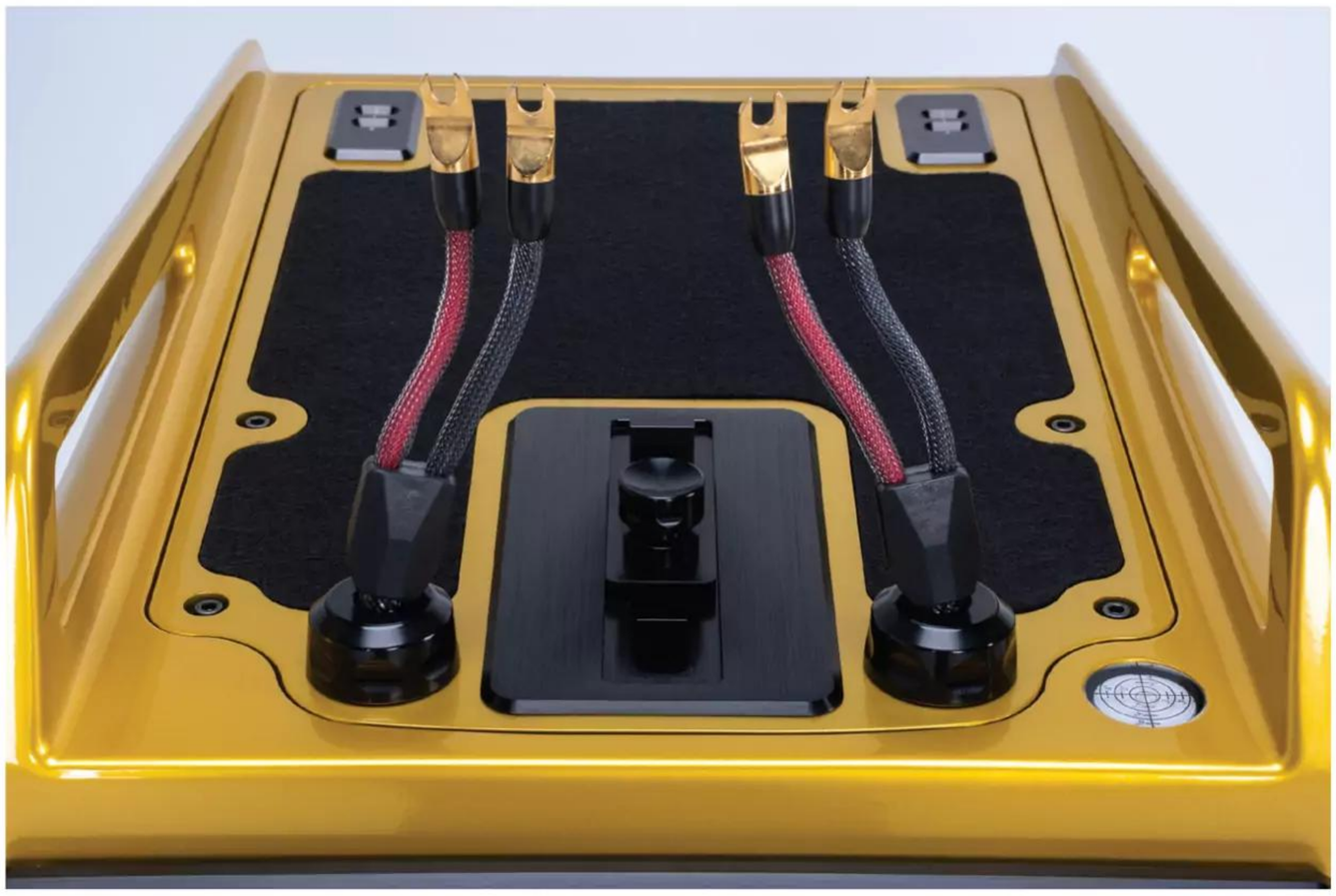
SPECIFICATIONS

Description Three-way, bass-reflex, floorstanding loudspeaker. Drive units: 1" Wilson Convergent Synergy Carbon doped-silk fabric tweeter in a sealed carbon-fiber enclosure; one 7" QuadraMag alnico-doped paper-pulp composite midrange driver in a rear-slotted enclosure; two 8" paper-pulp composite woofers in rear-ported X- and V-material enclosure. Sensitivity: 88dB/W/m at 1kHz. Nominal impedance: 4 ohms. Minimum impedance: 2.36 ohms @ 82Hz. Minimum amplifier power: 20Wpc. Frequency response: 20Hz–32kHz ±3dB room average response.
Dimensions 45.1" (1145mm) H (without Acoustic Diodes) × 14.5" (368mm) W × 23.9" (608mm) D. Weight: 245lb (111.13kg) each. Total shipping weight: 760lb/pair (344.7kg).
Finish Available in 4 standard colors, 12 custom colors, and 10 premium colors. Custom combinations are possible. Acoustic Diode spikes come in "natural" stainless steel and carbon black.
Serial numbers of units reviewed 0127, 0128 (listening), 0127 (measuring).
Price $48,900/pair, standard finish. Approximate number of North American dealers: 37. Warranty: 5 years with registration. Manufactured in US.
Manufacturer
Wilson Audio Specialties,
2233 Mountain Vista Ln.,
Provo, UT 84606.
Tel: (801) 377-2233.
Web: wilsonaudio.com.

PHOTOS: WILSON

net walls, which are now 25% thicker than they were in the previous model. The "S-material," with its own set of properties, is used in the baffles surrounding the drivers. The newer "V-material" is said to further deaden vibrations between the upper and lower modules, like some sort of magic acoustical mayonnaise.

I have read various descriptions of the composition of Wilson's cabinet materials. "Epoxy, loaded with crushed granite, carbon, and pulp" is one. In a previous review, I described a Wilson speaker as made out of "composite mixes of resin and cellulose." It would be easier to get info out of Jack Smith and the Justice Department than to get the cocktail recipes for these proprietary materials from Wilson Audio. After I offered Daryl limited immunity, he was willing to state on the record, "It's a high-density phenolic resin. It's a soup that's exactly the density, and with the fill material necessary, to get the performance characteristics that we need."



Setting the table

With Wilson loudspeakers, you have to put your back into your hi-fi—though every buyer of new or certified-used Wilson speakers can expect assistance from a dealer. However, I did the preliminary setup myself with a little help. Having been through it before, I was prepared; the shipping company agreed to roll the three heavy wood crates—two for the woofers, a third containing both upper cabinets—up the driveway and into the garage; that was the end of their involvement. The woofer cabinets arrive with casters installed so they can be rolled out of the crate and into position. That was step 1. Step 2 was hiring my son and one of his homies, for beer money, to carry the uncrated cabinets up to the second floor where my listening room is located. These were big guys, but they were sweating by the time their job was done.

MEASUREMENTS

As I had done for the Wilson Sasha DAW, which Sasha Matson reviewed in January 2020,[1] I measured one of the Sasha V speakers, serial number 0127, in Sasha's listening room. We lifted the speaker onto a small dolly so that we could rotate it for the off-axis response measurements. The inevitable reflection of the speaker's sound from the floor reduces the accuracy of the measurements in the midrange. All the measurements were performed without the grilles.

Wilson specifies the Sasha V's sensitivity as 88dB/W/1m. My estimate, in different units, was 91dB(B)/2.83V/m. As the Sasha V's nominal impedance is specified as 4 ohms, 2.83V will be equivalent to 2W rather than the specified 1W. Adjusting my estimate for this difference subtracts 3dB, confirming Wilson's estimate.

While the Sasha V's impedance magnitude remains above 4 ohms through the midrange and treble (fig.1, solid trace), it drops to 2.135 ohms at 83Hz. (The specified minimum impedance is 2.36 ohms at 82Hz.) The electrical phase angle (fig.1, dashed trace) is occasionally high, meaning that the EPDR,[2] or effective impedance, lies below 2 ohms through most of the bass and below 1.5 ohms between 107Hz and 121Hz. The Sasha V is a demanding load for the partnering amplifier.

When I investigated the woofer enclosure's vibrational behavior with a plastic-tape accelerometer, I didn't find any significant resonances. When I rapped its walls with my knuckles, it was impressively inert. The midrange/tweeter enclosure emitted a slight "plink" with the knuckle-rap test, and I found a low-level mode at 551Hz on the sidewalls and an even lower-level one at 300Hz (fig.2). The high Q (Quality Factor) and low levels mean that there shouldn't be any audible problems resulting from this behavior. These modes are also lower in amplitude and affected a smaller area than I had found with the Sasha DAW.

The impedance-magnitude plot has a saddle centered on a low 25Hz, which suggests that this is the tuning frequency of the large port on the woofer cabinet's rear panel. The two woofers behave identically; the blue trace in fig.3 shows the sum of their nearfield responses, which has its minimum-motion notch at the

1 See stereophile.com/content/wilson-audio-specialties-sasha-daw-loudspeaker-measurements.

2 EPDR is the resistive load that gives rise to the same peak dissipation in an amplifier's output devices as the loudspeaker. See "Audio Power Amplifiers for Loudspeaker Loads," *JAES*, Vol.42 No.9, September 1994, and stereophile.com/reference/707heavy/index.html.

Stereophile Wilson Sasha V Impedance (ohms) & Phase (deg) vs Frequency (Hz)

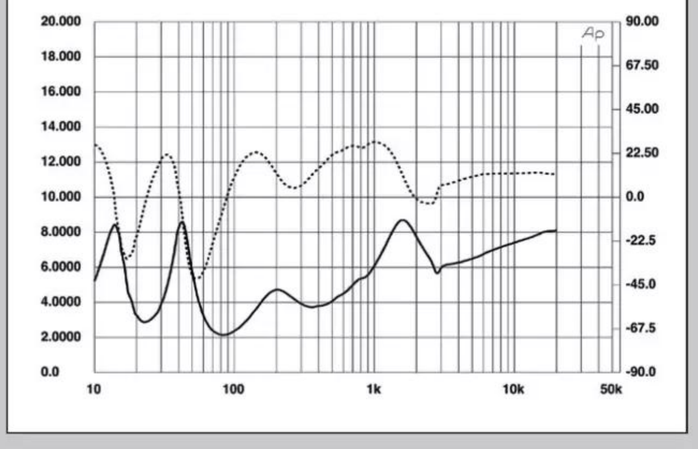


Fig.1 Wilson Sasha V, electrical impedance (solid) and phase (dashed) (2 ohms/vertical div.).

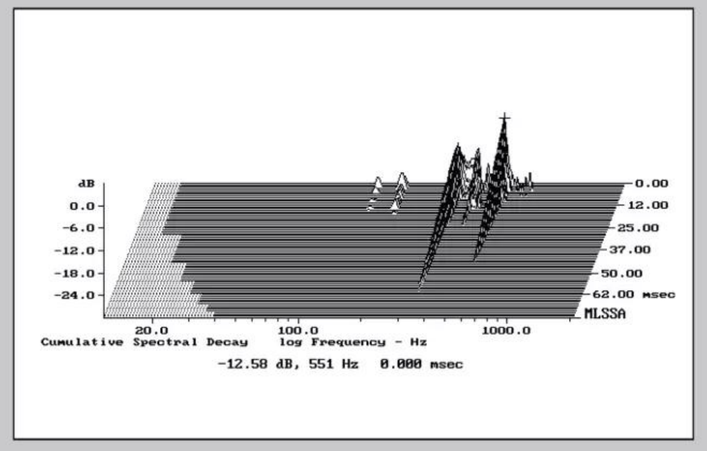
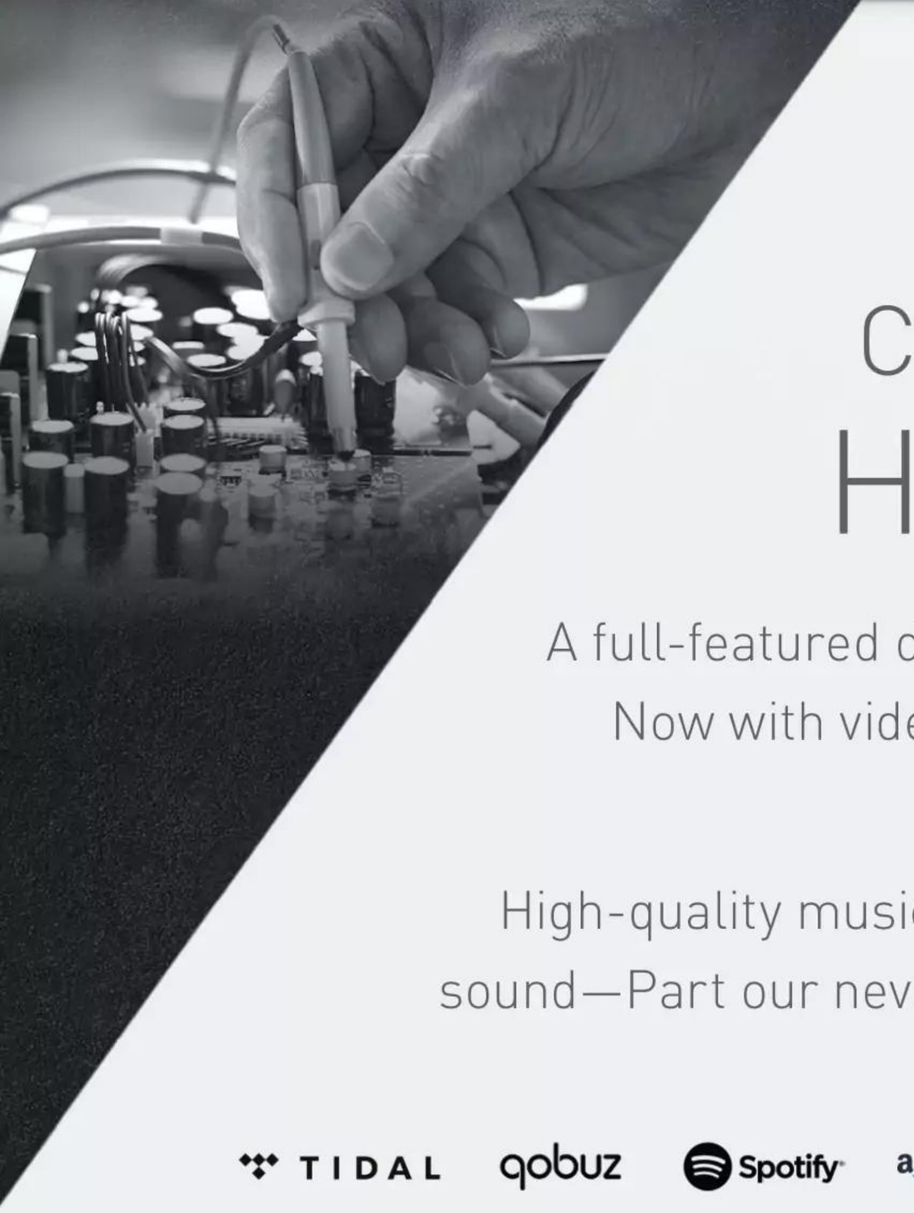


Fig.2 Wilson Sasha V, cumulative spectral-decay plot calculated from output of accelerometer fastened to the center of the upper-frequency enclosure sidewall (MLS driving voltage to speaker, 7.55V; measurement bandwidth, 2kHz).

Rediscover Music

Technics



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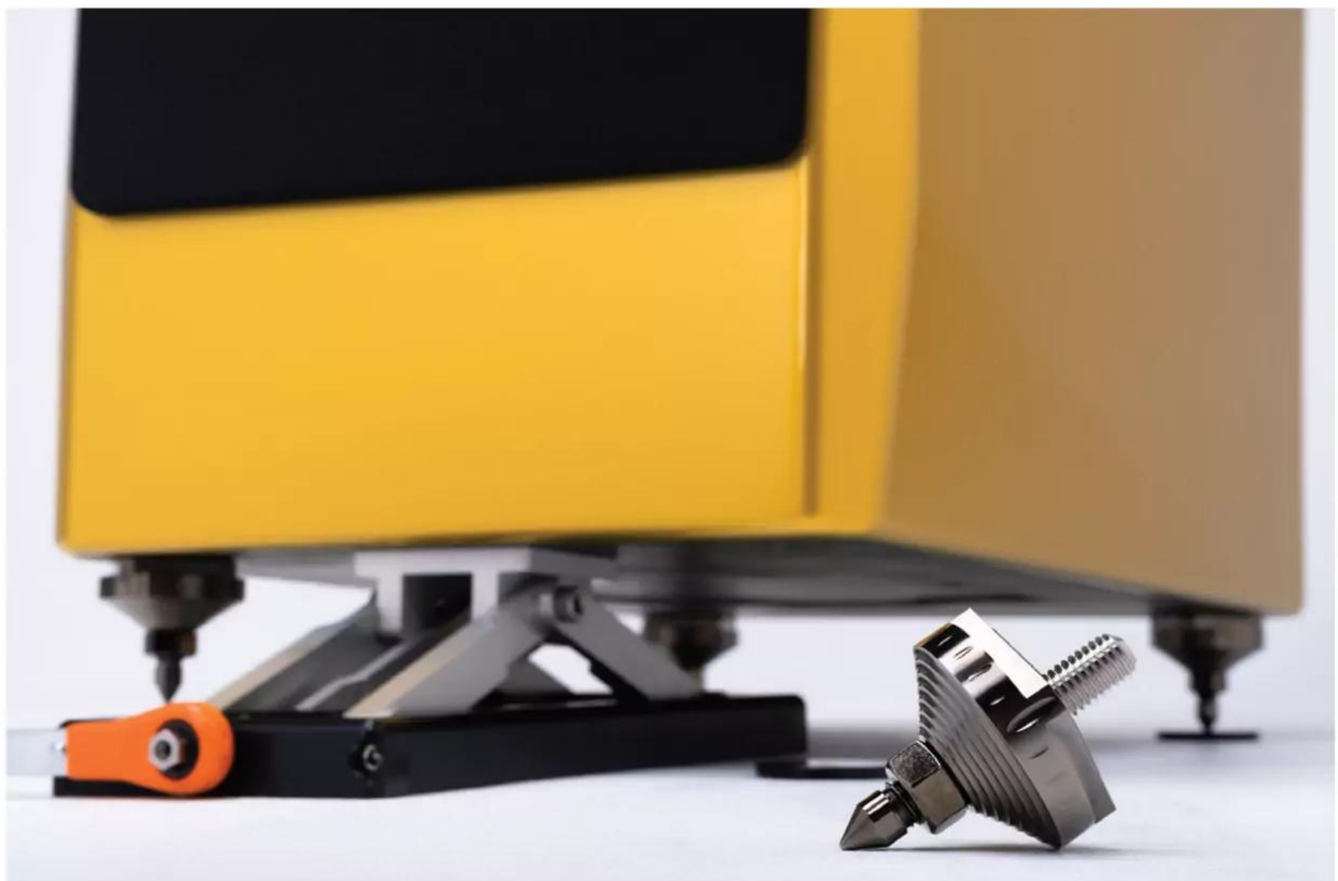
Toward the rear of the woofer cabinets on each side are twin "woofer blades"; they look like handles but also serve an acoustic function: helping to dissipate vibrational energy between the upper and lower cabinets, a design change from earlier models. Made out of solid "X-material," they are strong enough for lifting these 200lb woofer modules.

Giving thanks for the casters (and strong, young people), I rolled the lower cabinets into the positions previously occupied by the Sasha DAWs, like a drink cart rolling down the aisle on a jet. The upper cabinets are not light, but I was able to place them on top of the woofer cabinets and connect them. Wilson does not design its speakers for biwiring; the lower cabinets feature one +/– pair of nice, solid speaker taps, which connect internally to the woofers; from there the crossovers split the signals to the midrange and tweeters farther up.

The protective film covering the cabinets for shipping needs to be removed. Looks like thick Saran Wrap to me, and it is a pain to peel off.

With the Sasha Vs placed and connected, the next step was optimizing the "propagation delay adjustment," which Wilson also calls "time-alignment." The two-cabinet Sasha V is the first floorstander in the Wilson lineup that is designed to allow these parameters to be modified. In plain English, hardware allows for altering the relationship between the upper cabinet containing the midrange driver and tweeter, and the lower cabinet containing the twin woofers, to optimize the relative arrival times at the designated listening position. The design and setup is aimed at optimizing the "sweet spot" for a single listener.

This is achieved by adjusting, with the use of calibrated spikes, the rake angle and front-to-back distance of the upper cabinet in relation to the lower. The setup is based mainly on two parameters: the distance of the listening position from the cabinets, and the



measurements, continued

expected 25Hz. The nearfield response of the port (red trace) peaks between 18Hz and 30Hz, and its upper-frequency rolloff is very clean. The woofers cross over to the midrange unit (green trace) just below 200Hz with a well-controlled rolloff above that frequency. As with the Sasha DAW, the midrange unit's low-frequency rolloff starts at 400Hz and is very gentle.

The Sasha V's upper enclosure is mounted on the woofer bin with spikes and steps at the rear to allow the midrange and tweeter to be aimed at the listener's ears. The tweeter is 43" from the floor, and I measured the height of Sasha's ears as he slouched in his listening chair as 40". For the farfield response measurements, I calculated where the microphone should be placed on the line between the tweeter and Sasha's ears at my standard 50" distance. The midrange unit's output on this axis has a slight peak just below 1kHz before crossing over to the tweeter (black trace) between 1kHz and 2kHz, and it rolls out relatively smoothly. The tweeter's output has a lack of energy at the bottom of its passband and slightly too much top-octave output.

The black trace above 300Hz in fig.4 shows the Wilson's farfield response, averaged across a 30° horizontal window centered on the listening axis. The overall balance is even, though there is a slight lack of presence-region energy compared with the two octaves above that region.[3] The black trace below 300Hz in fig.4 shows the sum of the nearfield woofer and port outputs, taking into account acoustic phase and the different distance of each radiator from a nominal farfield microphone position. The rise in response in

3 My measured response is very similar to that measured by Paul Miller for *Stereophile*'s sister magazine *Hi-Fi News*. See hifinews.com/content/wilson-audio-sasha-v-loudspeaker-lab-report.

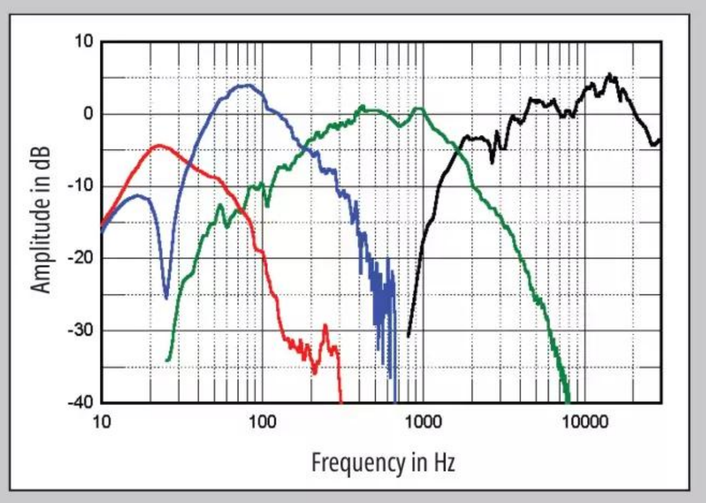


Fig.3 Wilson Sasha V, acoustic crossover on listening axis at 50", corrected for microphone response, with nearfield midrange (green), woofer (blue), and port (red) responses respectively plotted below 500Hz, 700Hz, and 300Hz.

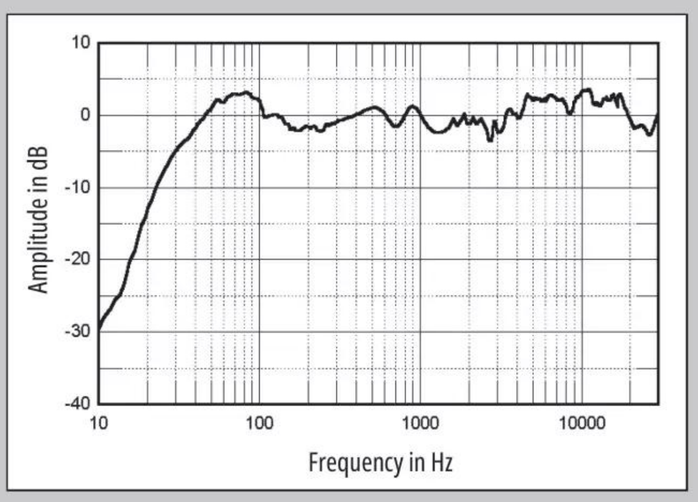


Fig.4 Wilson Sasha V, anechoic response on listening axis at 50", averaged across 30° horizontal window and corrected for microphone response, with the complex sum of the nearfield midrange, woofer, and port responses plotted below 300Hz.

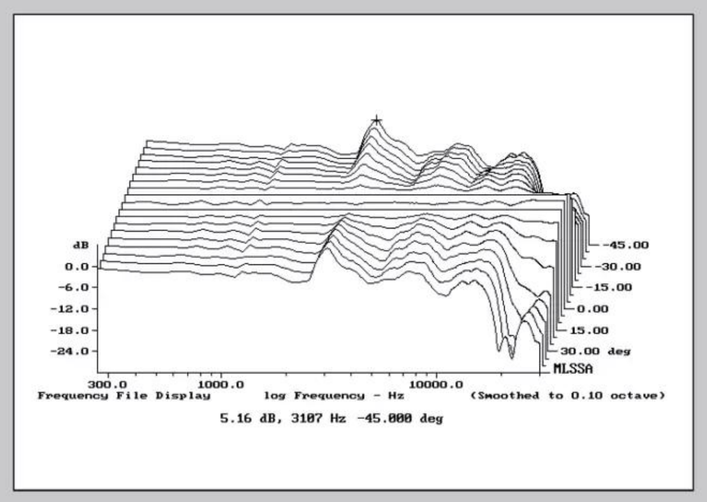


Fig.5 Wilson Sasha V, lateral response family at 50", normalized to response on listening axis, from back to front: differences in response 45°–5° off axis, reference response, differences in response 5°–45° off axis.

RELENTLESS 800
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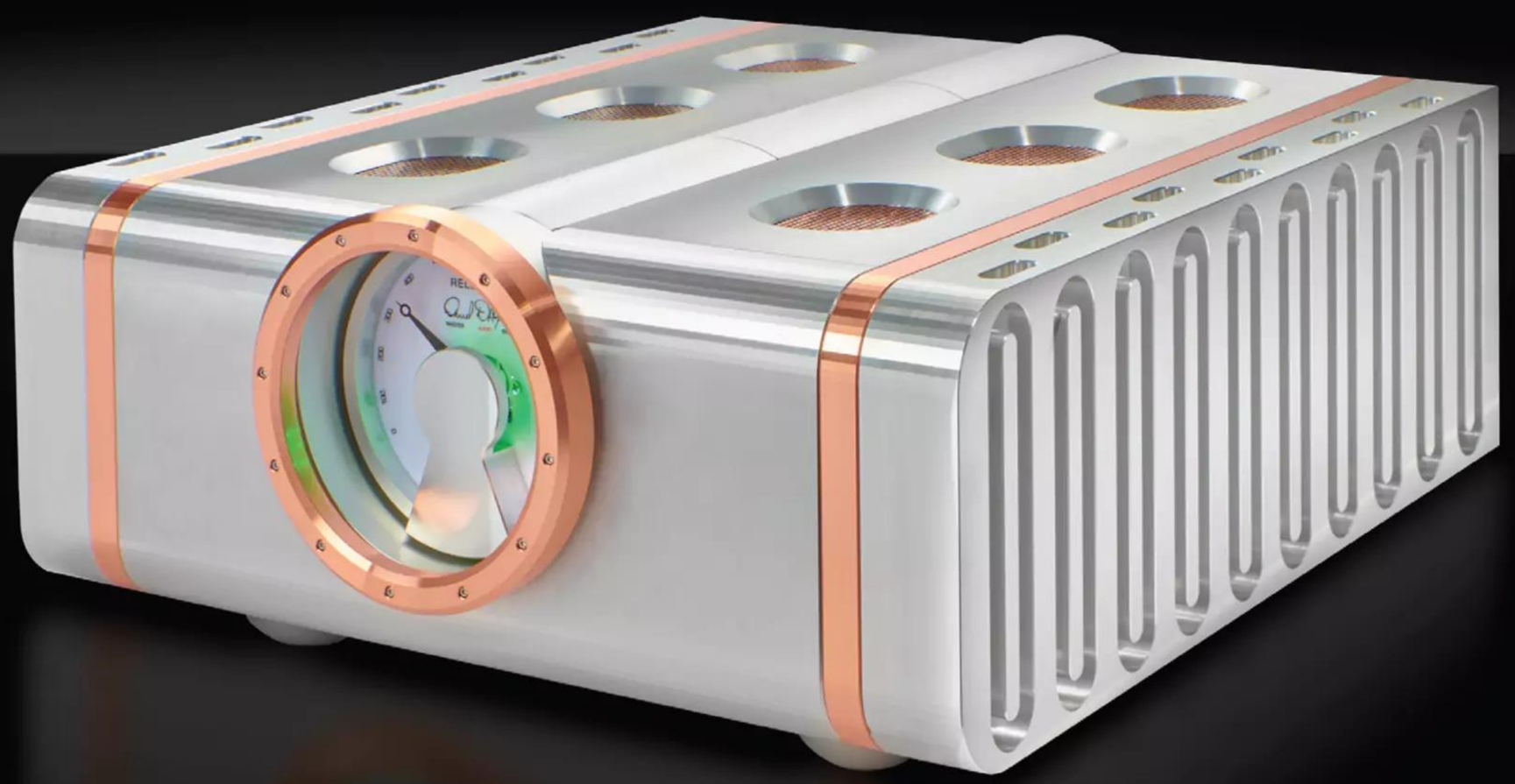

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With its nearly 4-kilowatt transformer and 400,000 µF capacitance power supply feeding 84 output devices, the Relentless 800 easily delivers 800 watts into 8 ohms—and when connected to a 220-volt outlet, doubles its output to 1,600 watts into 4 ohms and 3,200 watts into 2 ohms. Nuanced and musical at low volume levels, the Relentless 800 also delivers the striking dynamic contrasts that bring music to life in the tradition of every component from Dan D'Agostino Master Audio Systems.

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height of the listener's ears above the floor. With that information and the table, you can find the optimal settings for the rake-angle and front-to-back position of the upper cabinets. A thorough and well-written installation guide provides precise directions and tables. I figured it out, so you can, too—but if any of this sounds intimidating, remember that this is all your dealer's responsibility, not yours.

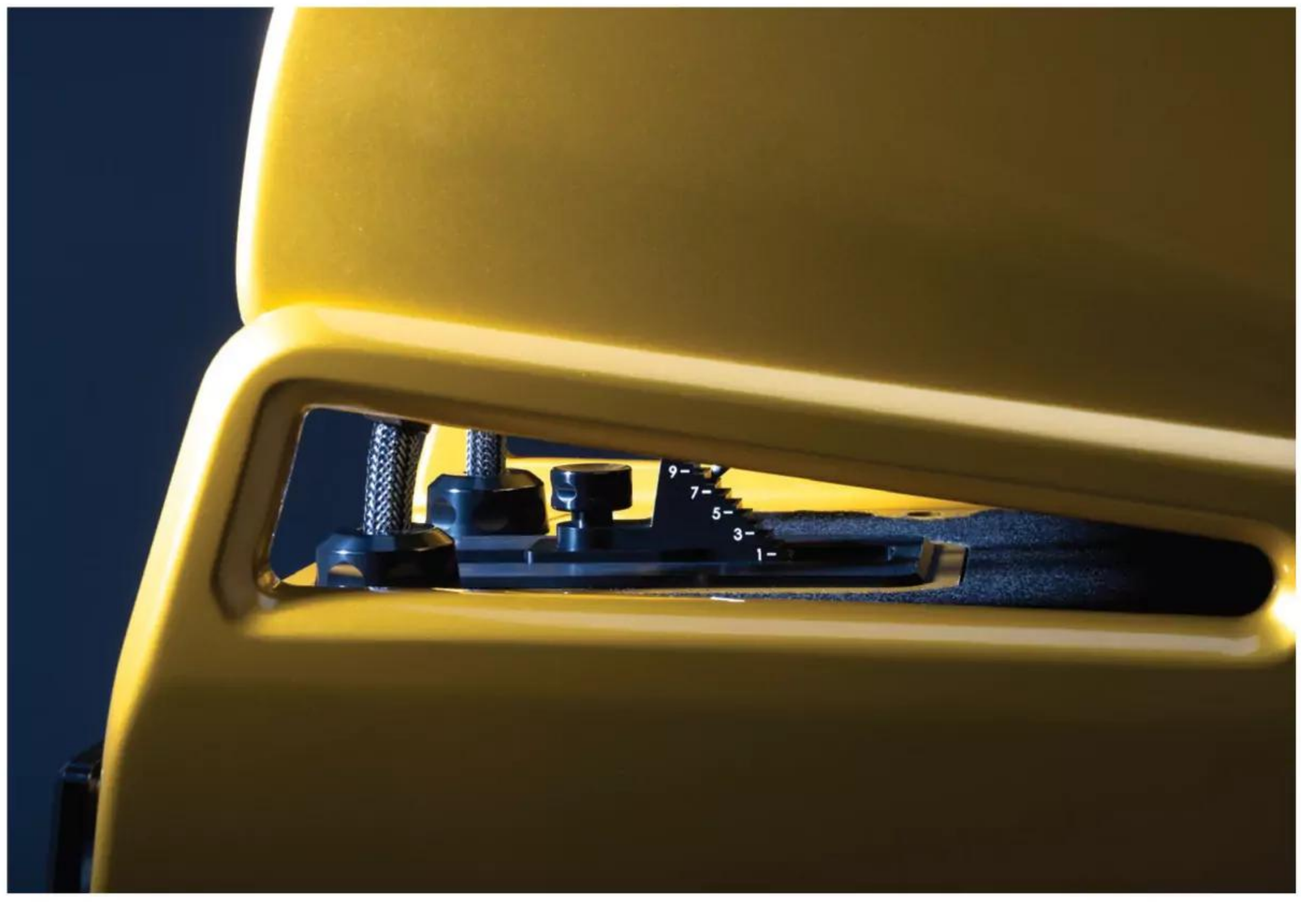
What the exact goal of this setup is and how well it is achieved is a complex topic that other colleagues have addressed. Jim Austin's review of the Wilson Alexx V includes a thorough explication (see footnote 2). In particular I note Jim's comment that "it's better to be *close* to perfect time-alignment than it is to be far away."

Changing horses midstream

The Sasha Vs had time to properly burn in prior to the arrival of Chris Forman of Innovative Audio in Manhattan, who was tapped by Wilson for the task of final installation. Chris was trained by Wilson Audio Specialties in their protocols and carries out many installations of Wilson loudspeakers in this region. Out came the tape measure and blue masking tape for the floor, to mark exact measurements. I had previously taped the positions of the Sasha DAWs; they still occupied the spots Wilson's Peter McGrath had chosen for them several years earlier.

There are no right angles in my listening room, in my 1872 Queen Anne Victorian, and the old wood framing on the second floor bounces like a trampoline when you walk across it. Room nodes? Fuhgeddaboudit. It would take a physics dissertation to figure it out—it's like being inside a very large string instrument. On the upside, when things work out, it's the best-sounding room for hi-fi I have lived with.

In discussing all this, Chris Forman said something that bears repeating: "There may be more than one sweet spot." It's best to relax



measurements, continued

the upper bass, which results from the nearfield measurement technique, is lower in amplitude than I usually find. Like the Sasha DAW, the Sasha V's low-frequency alignment appears to be optimized for definition; with the low tuning frequency of the port, boundary reinforcement will give extension to 20Hz in a typical room.

The Wilson Sasha V's horizontal dispersion, normalized to the listening-axis response, is shown in fig.5. (Even though the speaker was firing along the room's diagonal, the geometric limitations of SM's room meant that I could only measure the differences in response up to 45° to each side of the primary axis instead of my usual 90°.) The lack of presence-region energy on-axis reappears to the speaker's sides. The contour lines in this graph are otherwise even, implying stable stereo imaging. In the vertical plane (fig.6), a suckout develops in the upper crossover region 10° above the listening axis, but the balance is preserved 5° below that axis.

The Sasha V's step response (fig.7) is identical to that of the Sasha DAW. The tweeter's positive-going step arrives first at the microphone but has started to decay just before the midrange unit's negative-going step has reached its peak. The positive-going decay of the midrange step blends smoothly with the start of the woofer's step, which indicates an optimal crossover topology. The Wilson's cumulative spectral-decay plot (fig.8) is relatively clean overall, though some low-level delayed energy is present in the treble. There is also some delayed energy associated with the small on-axis peak just below 1kHz.

The Sasha V's measured performance is very similar to that of the Sasha DAW, though with even better-behaved enclosures, a slightly more even upper midrange, and a touch more top-octave energy.—**John Atkinson**

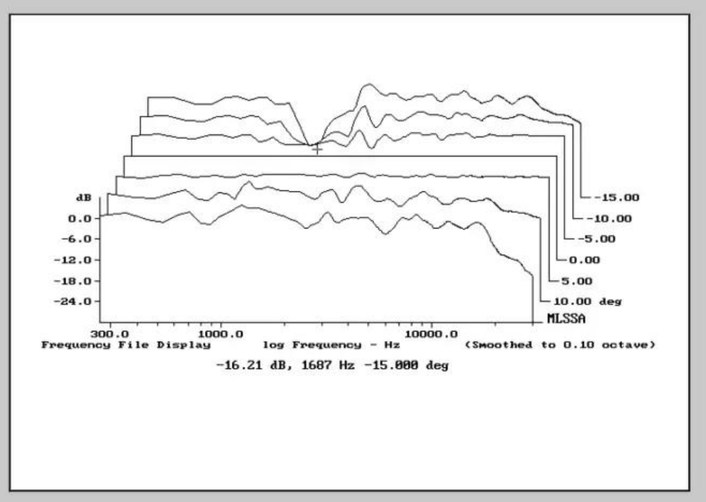


Fig.6 Wilson Sasha V, vertical response family at 50", normalized to response on listening axis, from back to front: differences in response 15°–5° above axis, reference response, differences in response 5°–15° below axis.

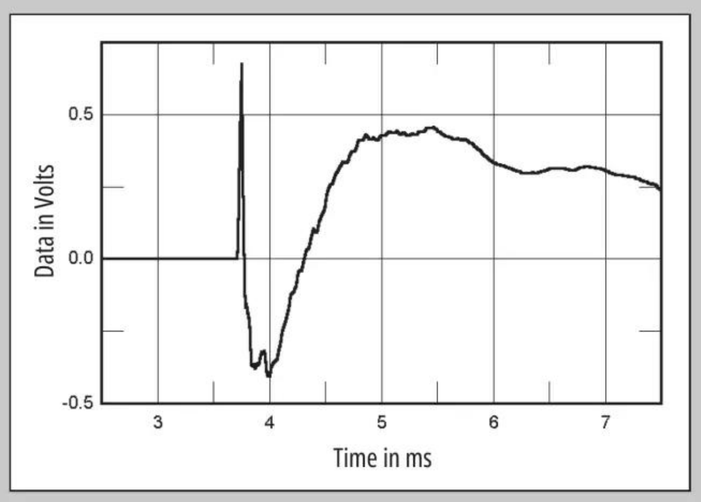


Fig.7 Wilson Sasha V, step response on listening axis at 50" (5ms time window, 30kHz bandwidth).

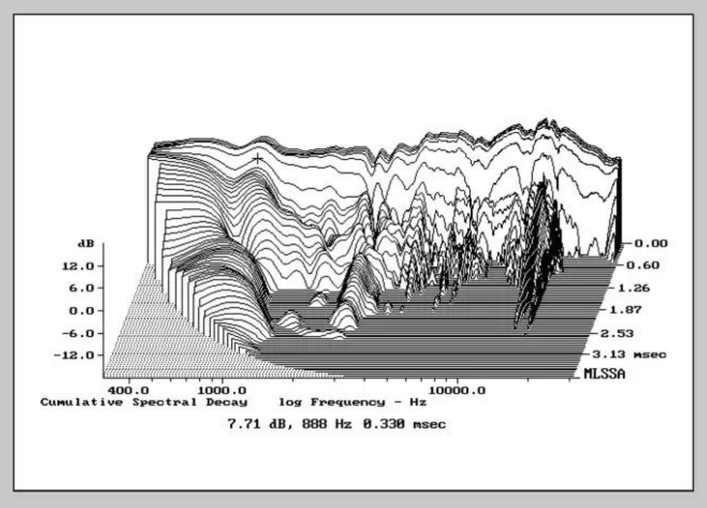


Fig.8 Wilson Sasha V, cumulative spectral-decay plot on listening axis at 50" (0.15ms risetime).

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AIR TIGHT

Atsushi Miura 1934-2022

Atsushi Miura, the founder of "A & M", had a desire to design and build an amplifier using 300B vacuum tubes since he launched the AirTight brand in 1986.
At that time, Western Electric had recently discontinued production of 300B tubes, making it unrealistic for a small start-up manufacturer to make a single-ended 8 Watt amplifier using tubes which were no longer in production.
However, in the late 90's that situation changed. Western Electric contacted Miura to ask for AirTight to support marketing and promotion of their new 300B tubes in Japan. Miura immediately accepted this request, and thus began his journey to build the 300B amplifier he had conceived in 1986.
In 1999, AirTight's first 300B single-ended amplifier, the "ATM-300" was announced. Its sophisticated styling, along with clean and tight sound, overturned the preconceptions that many audiophiles had toward single-ended triode designs.
The ATM-300 has been a best-selling amplifier for more than 20 years, becoming a symbol for the AirTight brand. To celebrate the 30th anniversary of the A&M company, Miura found it fitting that celebrate by releasing the "ATM-300 Anniversary" model, equipped with new TA-300B tubes made by Takatsuki Electric.

This limited edition 100-unit anniversary model raised the bar of performance even further and sold out within its first year.
Miura received so much enthusiastic feedback from the ATM-300 Anniversary model, that he felt led to design the ultimate 300B single-ended triode amplifier.
In 2018, the AirTight ATM-300R was released as an unparalleled reference model which pursues sophisticated simplicity in order to bring out all the charm of the 300B tube. This ATM-300R is the ultimate realization of Miura's dream from 1986 combined with everything learned over a journey of more than 30 years…

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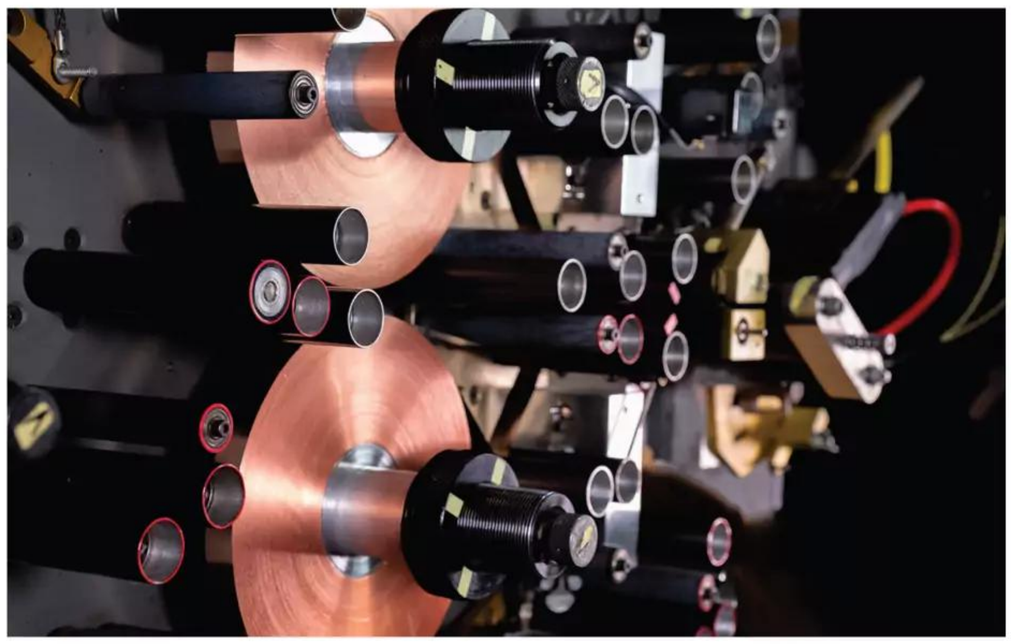
AIR TIGHT

and remain open to alternatives. There is more than one way to skin an audio cat.

First order of business was swapping out the casters the woofer cabinets had been shipped with and replacing them with the Acoustic Diode footers. First used in the Wilson Alexx V, these footers are conelike pieces assembled from stainless steel and a dollop of Wilson's newer V-material. Daryl Wilson explained to me, "There is coupling, and decoupling, designed into the Acoustic Diodes. Spikes are for coupling, to keep the cabinet from moving front to back, which causes blurring. The V-material is brilliant at *de*coupling: taking vibration, converting it to heat, ... just for damping."



We hadn't yet finalized the speakers' positions—and moving them is no easy thing with spikes that would punch a hole through the 1/3" thick piece of carpet on my listening room floor. Cue the slider set. These are large, flat, round metal discs offered as an accessory by Wilson that make it possible for very heavy cabinets with spikes to slide around on carpeting.

The pushing and shoving began, moving the Sasha Vs in small and large increments, forward and back, and side to side, in relation to measurements marked on the masking tape—all as Chris subjected himself (and me) to repeated playings of "So Do I" by Irish singer/songwriter Christy Moore, a founding member of Planxty. After each move, Chris sat in the listening chair and made notes, assigning numerical ratings on a form Wilson and its dealers use for this purpose, recording distances from walls and assigning ratings in seven categories: low-bass extension, upper-bass quality, soundstage & center focus, ambient bloom, harmonic balance, sense of dynamics, and flow.

In addition to using his ears and tape measure, Chris used a laser measuring gizmo that, when held up to his ear position (we did not change the position of my listening chair), measured exact distances from the listening position to the wall behind the speakers and from the ear to the drivers. In doing this, we discovered that the wall wasn't perpendicular to the rest of the room! It was off by an inch. This was important to know, in the context of Wilson's time-alignment settings, because if we had used an incorrect measurement from that wall and not compensated for this, the time-alignment effort would have been pointless.

As things shook down, the sweetest spot for the Sasha Vs was about 16" farther toward the front wall—the wall behind the speakers—in relation to where the Sasha DAWs had been sitting, and 4" farther out on toward the sidewalls. Not a small tweak, in other words. I asked Daryl Wilson what might have changed; he commented, "The ability of the system to settle: better damping. The X-material in the woofer is thicker than it was in the Sasha DAW. The ability of the system to start and stop in the woofer region. When the system is more refined and quicker, you can put it closer to the walls. It is more tolerant of boundary issues."

With final placement set, one more important adjustment was needed: leveling the cabinets. A new touch included in the design of the Sasha V is a small bubble level installed on the top of the woofer cabinet, visible with the upper modules in place. We adjusted the Acoustic Diode footers one at a time until the bubble levels were spot on. Why is this important? Because if the speakers aren't level, that throws off the precision of the time-alignment calibrations at the listening spot.

Music for all

I think that a proper review should include listening examples from a variety of musical genres. The first recording I reached for checks the pop genre box: Steely Dan's *Gaucho*. Spinning my original LP (MCA 6102/37220), "Babylon Sisters" felt like I was being enveloped in a cloud of music, almost a sense of surround, from a stereo pair of speakers. When the chicks first hit the chorus, "Babylon sisters, shake it!," they exploded into the room. Huge width, spectacular dynamics.

In order to carry out some basic A/B comparisons, I had stored the Sasha DAWs on the landing outside my listening room. Now my house was really looking like a hi-fi dealership! I swapped the Sasha DAWs back into the same position and compared. Through the DAWs there was a little less distinction between the Fender Rhodes Don Fagen plays and the electric bass doubling the part, most apparent at the top of the tune. In further listening, I've identified that sorting out musical parts one from another is one of its greatest talents. The DAWs exhibited slightly less

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sparkle and punch in the vocals than when heard from the Sasha Vs, perhaps a function of the new QuadraMag midrange?

Next major genre: full-scale orchestral classical. I pulled out a recording I think I've seen at every single audio show and dealership: Reiner and the Chicago Symphony doing Stravinsky's *Song of the Nightingale* and Prokofieff's *Lieutenant Kije* (LP, Living Stereo LSC 2150). The Stravinsky, which opens the B-side, sounds scary. First I listened through the Sasha DAWs, then I swapped in the Sasha Vs. That opener was several notches more intense—the shriek Igor intended. After the initial outburst come some real deep drums, reproduced by the Sasha Vs with astounding, physical heft. Then Stravinsky grinds gears, and we hear some delicate, measured tremolo from the strings, floating like a butterfly, stinging like a bee! Lovely, tangible textures. Later in the piece, the almost Coplandesque soft, sustained, jazzy harmonies behind the solo trumpet were to die for.

Are female jazz vocals one genre or two? It was time to stop classroom grading and start appreciating the Sasha Vs on their own merits. A longtime go-to for me and others is Ella Fitzgerald's definitive album *Clap Hands, Here Comes Charlie!*, from 1961. My LP copy is a fine, 200gm vinyl remaster from the late Classic Records (Verve V6-4053). The standout heartbreaker here has to be "Spring Can Really Hang You Up the Most." Listening to the Sasha Vs, I heard more subtle interplay between the softly mixed piano and the guitar than I've heard before. As for Ella, there was much velvet skin on the bone as she descended step by step from the first to the last statements of the refrain. When she lands on the word "most," she is in alto territory, an E-flat below middle C. Delicious!

Sure, I've got some hard rock. I had preordered the four-LP box set of the freshly remastered *Who's Next* (Polydor/UMC 35858531). The first LP is the original album, sequenced as it was released. The other three LPs contain a complete live performance by The Who at the San Francisco Civic Auditorium, on December 13, 1971. The live recording allowed me to continue playing my very own version of "Where's Waldo?"[4] I was there for that show, presented by Bill Graham, but I had never heard any of it on record until now. Glyn Johns, who mixed the studio album, was on hand to record the live performance to 16-track tape using the Wally Heider remote truck.

This is not some secondhand mixing board feed; the sound is powerful and clear. There's lots to enjoy here, but I got a particular kick out of "Baba O'Riley," as, instead of that shrill-sounding fiddle on the album, Roger Daltrey takes that part on the harmonica—and he can really blow.

I have told people over the years, and it remains true to this day, that the loudest musical event I have ever heard in my life was The Who at the San Francisco Civic Center. It was simply not possible to be in that auditorium without toilet paper or cotton in your ears; an immense, distortion-free PA flanked an immense Union Jack flag behind the stage. Pete Townsend's unique ability to simultaneously play lead and rhythm guitar was the Full Monty. The Sasha Vs were an ideal vehicle to try to get a sense of the excitement of that; as hard as I cranked them, there was not a whisper of strain or breakup. And I was feeding them a significant fraction of 425Wpc from my McIntosh MC462 stereo amp.

How about some contemporary classical music from an unfamiliar composer? When John Atkinson arrived to do his measurements of the Sasha Vs, it had been less than a week since I was in Hollywood, at EastWest Studios in their large Studio 1. This is the room where Sinatra cut all his 1960s albums for Reprise, when it was known as United Western Recorders. I wrote *Little Woodstar* scored for vocal quintet and studio orchestra. John Atkinson and Joe Harley are my coproducers. In Studio 1, we recorded a 16-piece group; the vocals will be recorded later in New York. The engineer was Steve Genewick, who for years was Al Schmitt's assistant at Capitol.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Analog sources VPI HW-40 turntable, VPI 12" Fatboy tonearm, Pro-Ject Classic EVO turntable, Lyra Etna λ Lambda cartridge, Ortofon Bronze Cadenza cartridge, Sumiko Amethyst cartridge.
Digital sources MacBook Air running Tidal, Roon, Qobuz. Bricasti M1 Series II DAC, Musical Fidelity M1 CDT transport, Pro-Ject CD Box RS2 T.
Preamplification McIntosh C12000 Preamplifier, McIntosh MA252 Integrated Amplifier.
Power amplifiers McIntosh MC462 Quad Balanced Stereo Amplifier, McIntosh MA252 Integrated Amplifier.
Loudspeakers Harbeth C7ES-3XD, Wilson Audio Specialties Sasha DAW.
Cables Digital: AudioQuest Diamond AES, Coffee USB; Interconnects: AudioQuest Fire, Sky; Speaker: AudioQuest Firebird, Robin Hood; AC: AudioQuest Dragon.
Accessories AudioQuest Niagara 7000 power conditioner, Mapleshade equipment rack, TonTrager speaker stands, Audiodesksysteme Vinyl Cleaner Pro, VPI Periphery Ring Clamp, IsoAcoustics isolation footers, Gingko Audio Cloud Platforms.
— Sasha Matson

Through the Sasha Vs, John and I listened to a temporary mix/edit of the orchestra tracks. With the memory of conducting the session fresh in my ears, the Wilson Sasha Vs created a sensation of one-to-one accuracy, every instrument laid out before me as I recalled it; a soundstage duplicating the true one, uncannily true musical re-creation. That's excellent audio engineering *and* reproduction.

V for victory

Wilson Audio, perhaps taking a cue from automobile manufacturers, offers the Wilson Audio Certified Authentic program, which provides an opportunity to purchase preowned and demo Wilson loudspeakers that have been thoroughly inspected and refreshed, in the field or, if necessary, at the Wilson factory in Provo, Utah; for details, contact the closest Wilson retailer. It's a great way to get into the Wilson sound for less than the cost of a new pair without trusting to luck with some "dealer" in Malaysia listed on Audiogon. Impressed by the cluster of new tonal qualities the Sasha V brings to the stable, I ended up changing horses, trading my Sasha DAWs in for the new Sasha V.

Are there drawbacks? Horses for courses. If you simply must drive your loudspeakers with watts in the single digits, the Sasha Vs are not right for you: They need juice to sit up and show what they are capable of. Other loudspeakers are more forgiving of bad recordings. These are not omnidirectional—though with the right recordings they can achieve a similar feeling of immersion in the music. There's cost of course, and size and weight: Wilson does offer smaller, lighter models—the Yvette and SabrinaX among floorstanders.

I have read many times about ascending cost curves in high-end audio, offering improvements at the margins, along with descriptions of "diminishing returns." But there's nothing diminishing in the enhancements offered by the Sasha V compared to its predecessor. Far from being marginal, they strike me as substantive and essential, expansive and ambitious. Daryl Wilson and his design and manufacturing team aren't just striving for excellence; they are achieving it in significant steps. ■

4 See Sasha's My Back Pages piece in the November issue of *Stereophile* or at stereophile.com/content/make-america-old-again-remembering-robbie-robertson-and-band.

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KEN MICALLEF

Luxman L-509Z

INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER

When I reviewed Luxman's L-509X flagship integrated amplifier, in May 2018,[1] that sleek machine shook me to my vitals. I wrote, "Record after record, the L-509X illuminated every important aspect and area of the recording. It lived and breathed in the air around the notes, consistently creating big, solid, spatially natural images that presented me with a) the roundness and complexity of each instrument, b) a holistic sense of the musicians' intent, c) excellent touch and texture and impact, and d) a unified whole, regardless of musical style or dynamic level." I concluded, "the Luxman L-509X integrated amplifier takes a different path to musical involvement. The L-509X is one of the most intimate-sounding, dynamic, texturally nuanced, truthful purveyors of music of my experience."

Luxman's *new* flagship integrated, the L-509Z, has the same thick aluminum top plate and steel casework as its forebear and weighs a similarly knee-crushing 64lb. The older L-509X cost $9495; its newer, younger sibling rachets that up to $12,495. The front-panel controls are nearly identical, including those big, eye-catching dual VU meters; except for a new 4.4mm Pentaconn five-conductor mini headphone jack and a mute button, the Z matches the cosmetics of the X to a T. But as in all things, appearances can be deceiving. Even the back panels are doppelgangers.

"Design of the L-509Z was a Luxman team effort, with Mr. Masakazu Nagatsuma responsible for overall tonal qualities, Mr. Kunihiko Koki for electronics, and Mr. Takeharu Sato for mechanicals," John Pravel, VP of sales for Luxman America, wrote to me in response to emailed questions.

"The Z-line represents a 'generational update' and upgrade above and beyond the X-Series," Pravel explained. "After a near ten-year period since the introduction of the X-Series, considerable circuit and parts improvements yielded superior sonic results. For example, the L-509X had op-amps and buffers in the

1 See stereophile.com/content/luxman-l-509x-integrated-amplifier.

SPECIFICATIONS

Description Two-channel integrated amplifier with 4-parallel bipolar, push-pull, class-AB output stage. Inputs, line: 4 pair single-ended (RCA; Line 1 and Line 2 are "Original high rigidity terminals"), 2 pair balanced (XLR); Amplifier in ("Main In," RCA); Phono, switchable MM, high/low, MC (RCA). Outputs, line: Rec Out, Monitor, Pre Out (all RCA); two pair loudspeaker output terminals with independent on/off switching. Input sensitivity/input impedance, MM phono 2.5mV/47k ohms; MC-H phono 0.3mV/100 ohms; MC-L phono 0.1mV/40 ohms, SE line 180mV/47k ohms; Balanced line 180mV/79k ohms; Main in 1.1V/47k ohms. Output power: 120Wpc into 8 ohms (20.8dBW), 220Wpc into 4 ohms (20.4dBW). Frequency response: phono 20Hz–20kHz, ±0.5dB; line 20Hz–100kHz, ±3dB. Tone controls: Bass ±8dB at 100Hz; Middle ±8dB at 760Hz; Treble, ±8dB at 10kHz. THD: <0.007% (8 ohms, 1kHz), <0.03% (8 ohms, 20Hz–20kHz). Signal/noise ratio (IHF-A): MM phono >87dB; MC-H phono >70dB; MC phono >62dB; line >105dB. Damping factor: 330. Power consumption: 390W (maximum), 150W (no signal), 0.5W (standby). Supplied accessories: RA-17A remote control, power cord.

Dimensions 17.3" (440mm) W × 7.6" (193mm) H × 18.2" (463mm) D. Weight: 64.6lb (29.4kg).

Serial number of unit reviewed G30800022. Manufactured in Japan.

Price $12,495. Approximate number of dealers: 70. Warranty: three years.

Manufacturer
Luxman Corporation,
1-3-1 Shinyokohama,
Kouhoku-ku, Yokohama-shi,
Kanagawa 222-0033, Japan.
Tel: (81) (0)45-470-6980.
Web: luxman.co.jp.
US distributor:
Luxman North America,
27 Kent St., Unit 122,
Ballston Spa, NY 12020.
Tel: (518) 261-6464.
Web: luxmanamerica.com.com.

preamp section. The L-509Z has a fully discrete LIFES system in the preamp. Z-Series also has a seven-segment LED display, 12V trigger and control terminals, and mid-frequencies (EQ) adjustment controls." The L-509Z also includes Luxman's "LECUA 1000 computerized attenuator" and "crack-resistant peel coat PCBs," the website states.

Let's go over that list of changes.

"Fully discrete LIFES" is Luxman's new feedback system, replacing the legacy ODNF (Only Distortion Negative Feedback). LIFES stands for Luxman Integrated Feedback Engine System; the L-509Z includes version 1.0, aka LIFES1.0; LIFES is now used in both the L-509Z's preamp and the power amplifier sections. LIFES1.0 aims to reduce the unwanted effects of using negative feedback and is said to lower the S/N ratio and distortion. Distortion is lowered "to less than half of the distortion as compared to ODNF4.0, the final derivation as utilized in the previous X-Series, with S/N improved by 3dB," wrote Pravel.

The L-509X included only bass and treble tone controls, now augmented by that "MIDDLE" dial, which Luxman says is "effective in the vocal and lead instrument frequencies bandwidth." L/R Balance, Subsonic, Mute, Mono, and other front-panel controls also appeared on the L-509X, as did the "Line Straight" button, which bypasses the tone controls for the least signal degradation.

What's LECUA? "LECUA" stands for Luxman Electronically Controlled Ultimate Attenuator. "The L-509Z combines a highly precise rotary encoder with a newly developed weighted rotation mechanism to create the 'LECUA-EX,'" the website states, "which offers even greater reliability and a natural, high-quality operational feel. Eighty-eight fine steps from 0 to 87dB and an acceleration setting for the speed at which the volume knob is rotated and a long press

MEASUREMENTS

I performed a full set of measurements on the Luxman L-509Z using my Audio Precision SYS2722 system.[1] The amplifier is specified as having a maximum output power of 120Wpc into 8 ohms; I preconditioned the L-509Z before the measurements by following the CEA's recommendation, running it at one-eighth that power into 8 ohms for 30 minutes. Following that period, the top panel was warm, at 92.6°F (33.7°C), and the grilles over the internal heatsinks were hotter, at 111.5°F (44.2°C). I performed a complete set of tests using the single-ended line inputs, as they had been used by KM for his auditioning.

Looking first at the L-509Z's unbalanced line inputs, the amplifier preserved absolute polarity at all of its outputs. The volume control operated in accurate 1dB steps in Line Straight mode, and with the volume control set to the maximum, "0," the voltage gain at 1kHz was 43.7dB into 8 ohms from the loudspeaker outputs and from the headphone outputs and 14.67dB from the Preamplifier outputs. These gains were not affected by switching the tone controls, set to do nothing, into the circuit. The single-ended input impedance is specified as 47k ohms. I measured 43.5k ohms at 20Hz, 41.9k ohms at 1kHz, and 34.8k ohms at 20kHz. In Separate mode, which disconnects the amplifier's front-end circuitry from the power amplifier section, the latter's input impedance was 46k ohms at 20Hz and 1kHz, 35.1k ohms at 20kHz.

The Preamplifier output impedance was 680 ohms at all audio frequencies; the headphone output impedance was 80 ohms, again at all audio frequencies. The loudspeaker output impedance, including 6' of spaced-pair speaker cable, was low in the bass and midrange, at 0.1 ohm, rising to 0.14 ohm at the top of the audioband. Consequently, the modulation of the L-509Z's frequency response due to the

1 See stereophile.com/content/measurements-maps-precision.

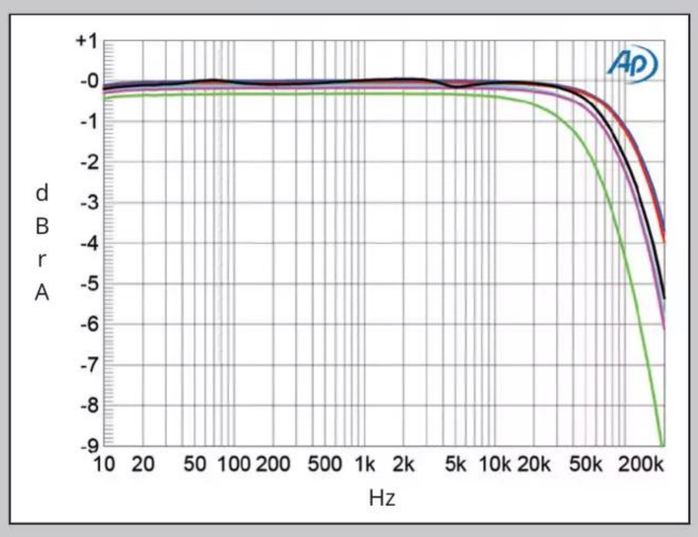

Fig.1 Luxman L-509Z, line input, frequency response at 2.83V into: simulated loudspeaker load (gray), 8 ohms (left channel blue, right red), 4 ohms (left cyan, right magenta), 2 ohms (green) (1dB/vertical div.).

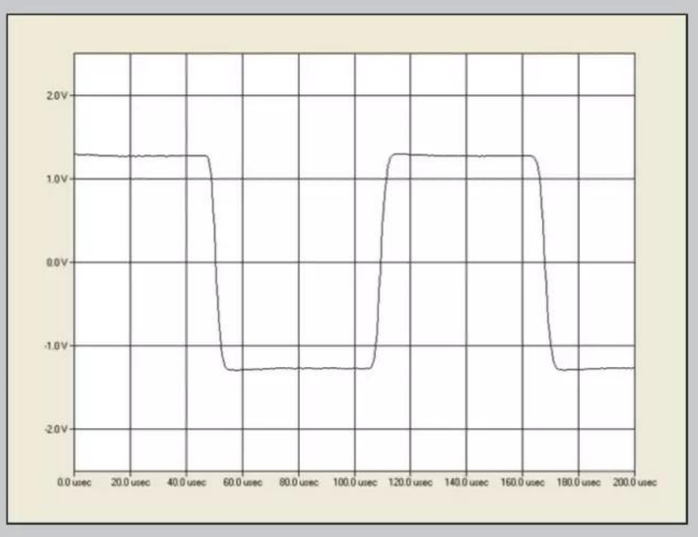

Fig.2 Luxman L-509Z, line input, small-signal, 10kHz squarewave into 8 ohms.

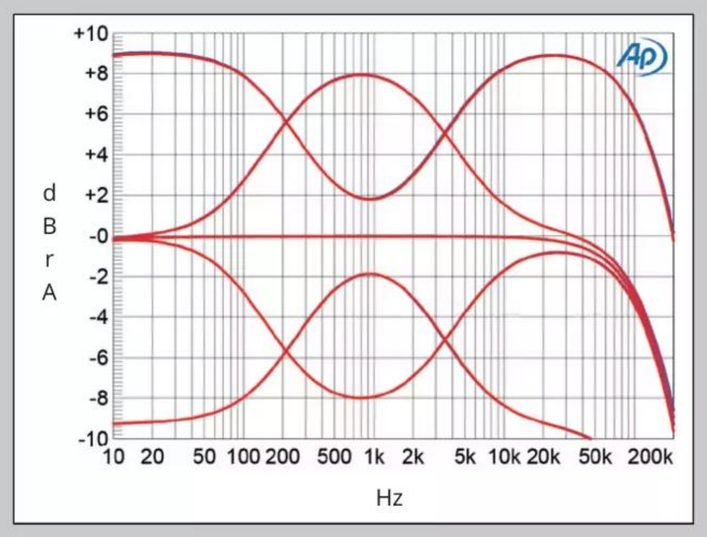

Fig.3 Luxman L-509Z, line input, frequency response at 2.83V into 8 ohms with treble, midrange, and bass controls set to their maximum and minimum (left channel blue, right red).

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- The Absolute Sound, issue 343, November 2023
stereo amplifier
p.37 Wilson Audio SabrinaX loudspeaker, $19,
p.37 Magnepan MG20.7/MG30.7 loudspeaker, $19,795, $39,995
p.164 dCS Bartok Apex DAC, $20,950
p.44 Magico S3 loudspeaker, $45,500
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Chromecast built-in
AirPlay 2
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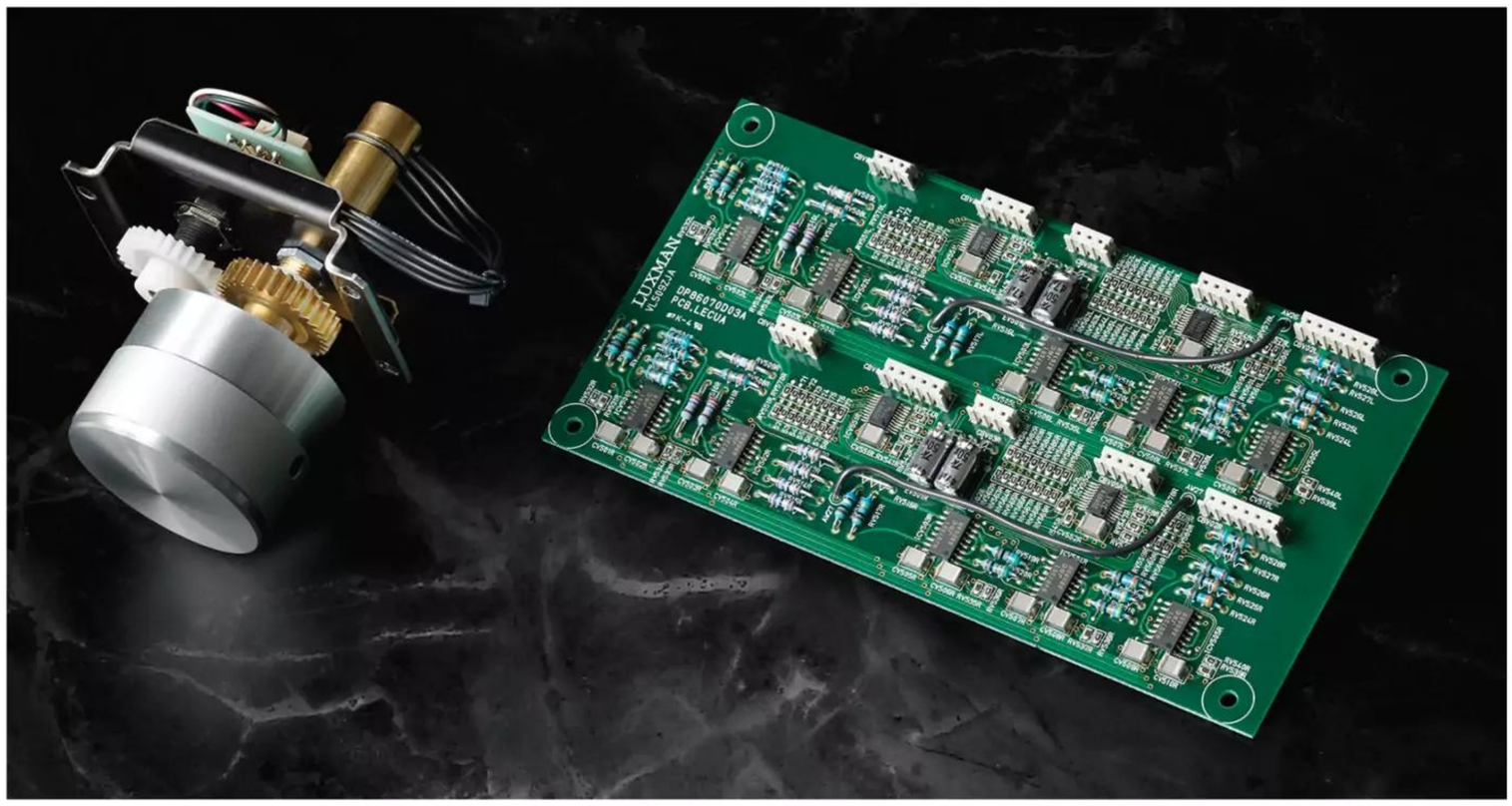
audience
audience-av.com

setting for the remote control allows for comfortable and thorough volume control action with minimal degradation in sound quality."

So what about "crack-resistant peel coat PCBs"? On a typical circuit board, a thin, lacquer-like polymer is used as a solder mask to prevent unwanted solder accumulations between closely spaced components and solder pads; the mask also provides some protection to the conducting traces during manufacturing. But the mask, which is permanent, can cause stray capacitance; Luxman says it "can have a smearing effect on audio signals." In Luxman's process, the mask is removable—and is removed, removing the mask-induced stray capacitance. Another interesting thing about the circuit boards is the curvy, swoopy course of those 0.1mm-thick gold traces "utilized for each channel of the L-509Z power amplifier section and in other internal locations"; those curvy traces create "better sound, improved current flow, with lower inductance as compared to PCB traces having 'right-angle' signal path direction changes," Pravel said. All internal wiring is OFC copper, and the last leg, from the output stage to the loudspeaker binding posts, is a copper cable with a 3.5mm^2 cross-sectional area.



Inside, each channel of the L-509Z's class-AB output stage uses three-stage Darlington bipolar transistors in quadruple-parallel push-pull configuration to deliver 120Wpc into 8 ohms, 220Wpc into 4 ohms—same power output ratings as the L-509X. A new,

measurements, continued

Ohm's law interaction between this impedance and the impedance of our standard simulated loudspeaker[2] was minimal (fig.1, gray trace). The amplifier's response into resistive loads was flat in the audioband, with its output into 8 ohms (blue and red traces) down by 4dB at 200kHz. This graph was taken in Line Straight mode and with the volume control set to its maximum. Commendably, both the very close channel balance and the overall response were preserved at lower settings of the volume control. The L-509Z accurately reproduced a 10kHz squarewave (fig.2), with no overshoot or ringing.

The audioband response with the tone controls switched on but set to do nothing was still flat, but the output at 200kHz was 6dB lower than in Line Straight mode. Fig.3 shows the effect of the tone controls set to their maximum and minimum positions. The bass and treble controls boosted or cut their passband outputs by 9dB, the midrange control by 8dB.

Channel separation was moderate, at 70dB across the audioband. The wideband, unweighted signal/noise ratio, taken in Line Straight mode with the unbalanced input shorted and the volume control set to its maximum, was a good 72.6dB ref. 2.83V, which is equivalent to 1W into 8 ohms, in both channels. This ratio improved to an even better 83.7dB when the measurement bandwidth was restricted to the audioband and to 86.8dB when A-weighted. Switching on the tone controls set to do nothing decreased the S/N ratios by 12dB. The blue and red traces in fig.4 show the amplifier's low-frequency noisefloor at 1Wpc into 8 ohms in Line Straight mode with the volume control set to its maximum. The level of random noise is low, but odd-order harmonics of the AC supply frequency are present, which will be due to magnetic interference from the power transformer. Reducing the volume by 20dB and increasing the input signal by the same amount so that the output power remains at 1W (green and gray traces)

2 See stereophile.com/content/real-life-measurements-page-2.

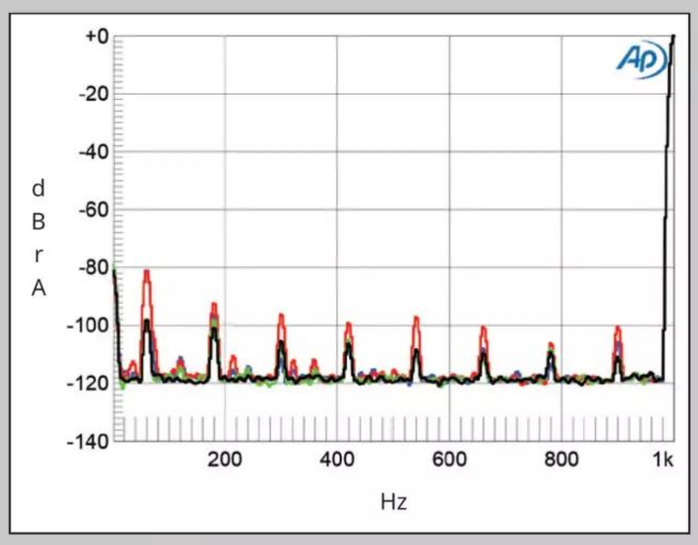


Fig.4 Luxman L-509Z, line input, spectrum of 1kHz sinewave, DC–1kHz, at 1Wpc into 8 ohms with volume control set to the maximum (left channel blue, right red), and to –20dB (left green, right gray) (linear frequency scale).

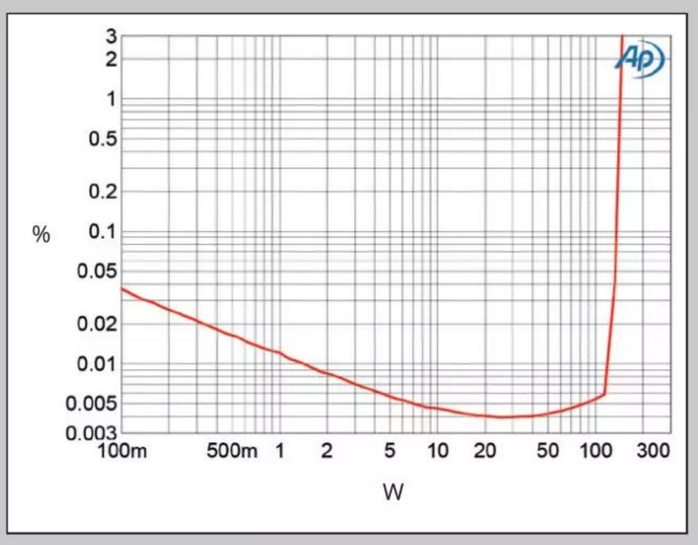


Fig.5 Luxman L-509Z, line input, distortion (%) vs 1kHz continuous output power into 8 ohms.

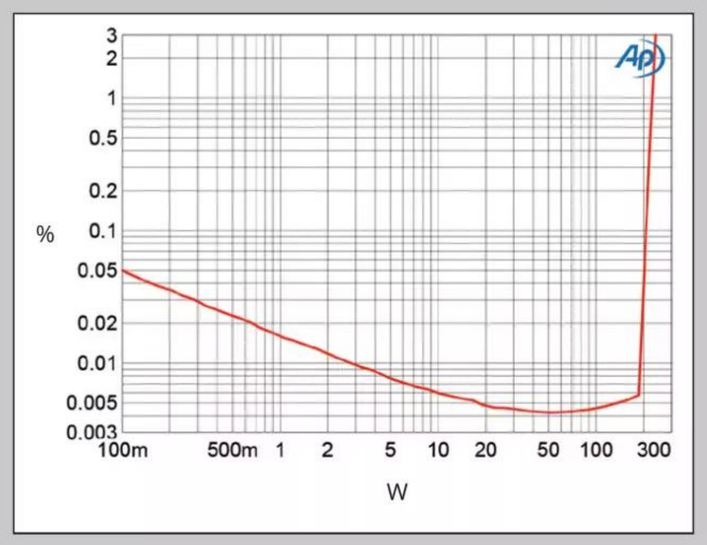


Fig.6 Luxman L-509Z, line input, distortion (%) vs 1kHz continuous output power into 4 ohms.

bespoke, low-loss 600VA EI-core power transformer, with round copper windings and 40,000µF per channel of filter capacitance, features "newly developed, large capacity filter capacitors of a more recent internal construction, like those used in the M-10X power amplifier," Pravel wrote. The L-509Z adds newly developed Toshin and Nippon Chemi-Con capacitors.

The L-509Z includes a higher-specced MM/MC phono section with a "new two-step gain switch to select between high and low MC settings to accommodate a wider range of MC cartridges," the website states. By using the "Pre-Out" or "Main In" connections and a front-panel switch ("Separate") that decouples the preamp and power amp sections, the listener can run the L-509Z's pre and power amp sections as separate, standalone components. Luxman's "beeline" technology ensures the "shortest practical signal path implementation," Pravel explained. "The preamp section is located near the rear input-panel, so signals don't travel the distance to the front panel. From input to output, shortest signal routes are optimized for minimum capacitance."

Twenty-eight sharply sculpted top-panel venting chambers, with honeycomb-mesh protective grids, add to the L-509Z's allure. A chunky, user-friendly aluminum remote add to its functionality.

Just like the L-509X, the amplifier is supported by four large insulator feet made from a cast iron/graphite material, which protect the chassis from external vibrations. "The material density [of the feet] increases from the outside diameter toward the center to counteract and suppress external vibration effects," Pravel wrote.

The L-509Z features a large numerical "seven-segment" LED display, which made reading volume levels a cinch across my small room. The VU meters are illuminated by white LEDs, making them easier on the eyes. The back panel sports four pairs of single-ended (RCA) line inputs and two pairs of balanced (XLR) inputs; the first

measurements, continued

reduced the level of the 60Hz component by the same 20dB and those of the higher-order spuriae by up to 10dB.

Figs.5 and 6, respectively, plot how the THD+noise percentage varies with output power into 8 ohms and 4 ohms with both channels driven. The downward slope below 30Wpc into 8 ohms and 60Wpc into 4 ohms indicates that the distortion lies below the noise up to these powers, but it remains very low until the actual onset of clipping. At our usual definition of clipping, which is when the THD+N reaches 1%, the L-509Z slightly exceeded its specified output powers of 120Wpc into 8 ohms (20.8dBW) and 220Wpc into 4 ohms (20.4dBW). The Luxman clipped at 140Wpc into 8 ohms (21.46dBW) and 225Wpc into 4 ohms (20.5dBW). I didn't test the Luxman's clipping power into 2 ohms, as the amplifier isn't specified as being able to deliver full power into 2 ohms.

Fig.7 shows how the THD+N percentage changed at 12.67V, which is equivalent to 20W into 8 ohms, 40W into 4 ohms, and 80W into 2 ohms. The distortion into 4 ohms (cyan and magenta traces) and 8 ohms (blue and red traces) is very low, rising only a little in the top two octaves, which suggests that the amplifier has a wide open-loop bandwidth. However, into 2 ohms, the distortion in the right channel (gray trace) is higher than that in the left channel (green trace), though it is still low in absolute terms.

The THD+N waveform at 20W into 8 ohms was primarily the second harmonic (fig.8), which will be subjectively innocuous up to much higher levels than those observed in the L-509Z (though some crossover distortion is present; see fig.9). Intermodulation distortion was also extremely low, even into 4 ohms (fig.10).

To examine the performance of the L-509Z's phono input, I connected a wire from one of the Audio Precision's ground terminals to the grounding lug on the Luxman's rear panel. This input preserved absolute polarity in all three modes at all three output types. In MM mode, the input impedance measured an appropriate 44k

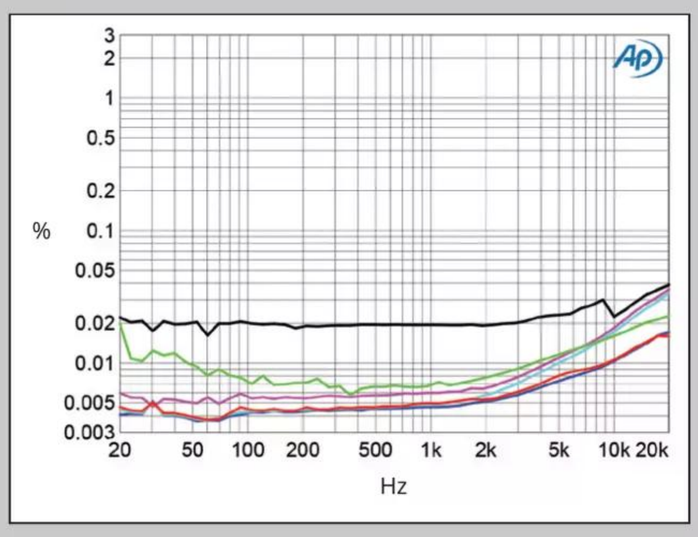


Fig.7 Luxman L-509Z, line input, THD+N (%) vs frequency at 12.67V into: 8 ohms (left channel blue, right red), 4 ohms (left cyan, right magenta), 2 ohms (left green, right gray).

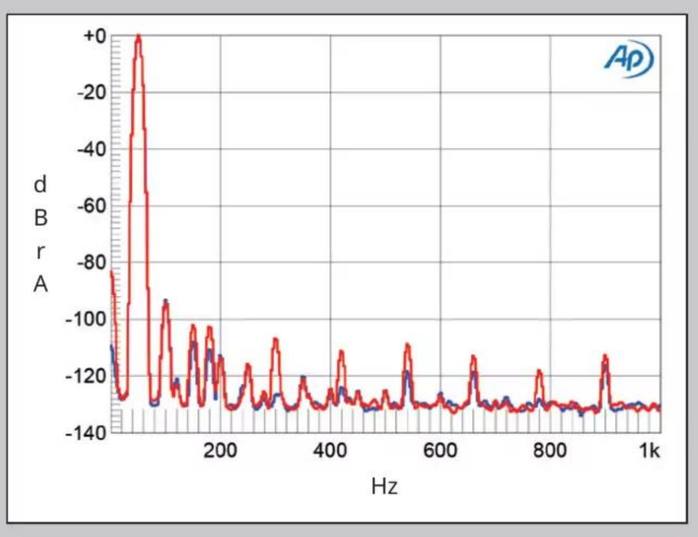


Fig.8 Luxman L-509Z, line input, spectrum of 50Hz sinewave, DC–1kHz, at 20Wpc into 8 ohms (left channel blue, right red, linear frequency scale).

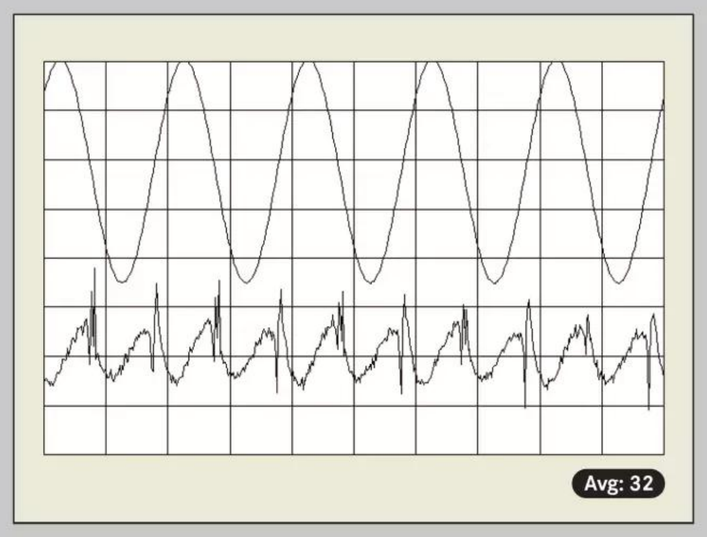


Fig.9 Luxman L-509Z, line input, 1kHz waveform at 30W into 8 ohms, 0.0036% THD+N (top); distortion and noise waveform with fundamental notched out (bottom, not to scale).

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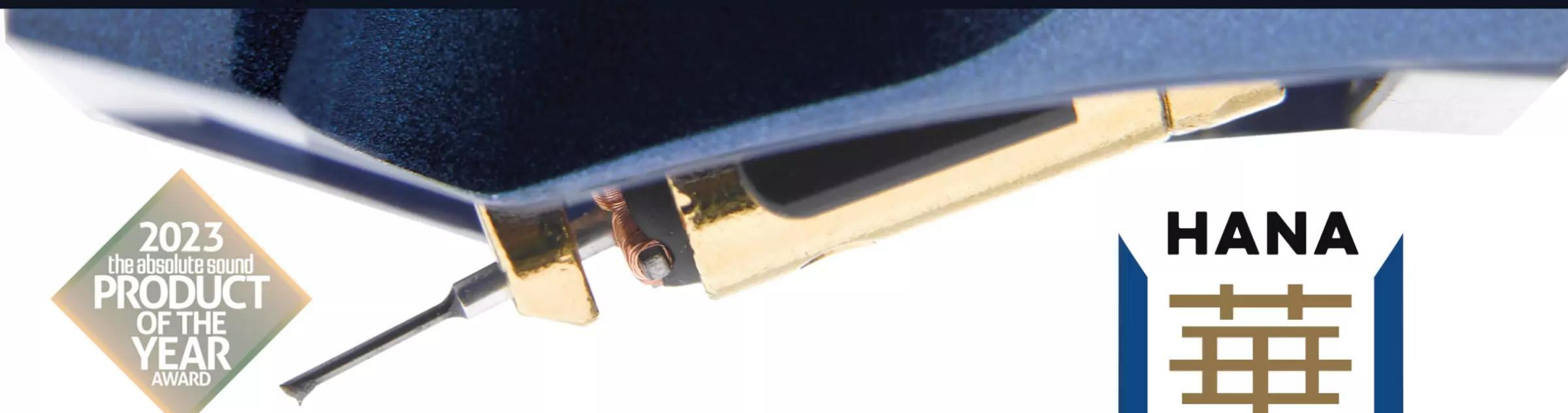

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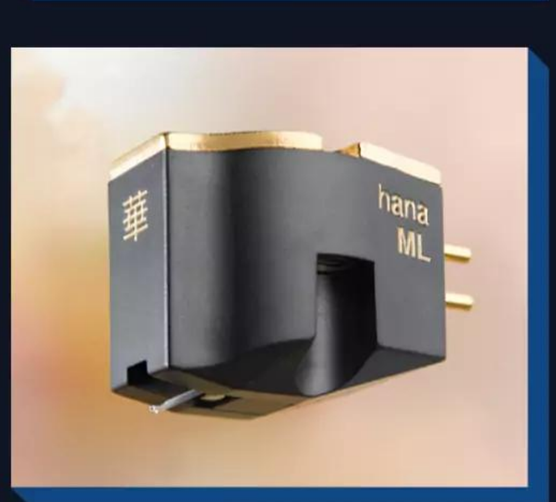

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Umami Red - Audiophilia Canada 2022
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Umami Red - StereoNET Australia 2021
Umami Red - Hi Fi Review Hong Kong 2020
Umami Red - Hifi+ UK 2020
Hana ML - Hifi+ UK 2019
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two RCA inputs are on "original high rigidity terminals." This is "a design borrowed from our flagship C-900u/C-10X preamplifiers," according to Luxman USA head Jeff Sigmund. "These terminals employ a special copper alloy with the conductivity equivalent to copper and the hardness equivalent to brass. They also feature an improved internal structure allowing for better contact with the associated cable, as well as improved oversized termination points where the 509Z's internal wiring connects to the rear of the terminal assembly." Why use only two? On the inside of the rear panel, they take up too much space.

Two preamp outputs and one power-amp input facilitate system configuration including biamping. A classic Luxman hairline finish adorns the amplifier's top panel. The supplied remote control replicates the front-panel options, including power on.

To the lovely, CNC-cut top plate, Luxman adds "blaster-finished" aluminum-alloy front and side panels and powder-coated steel bottom and rear panels. Aluminum-alloy blaster finish, which is also used on the remote, is the "same process used in camera finishes by the likes of Nikon and Canon," Pravel wrote.

Unlike many manufacturers that insist you download the owner's manual, Luxman included a copy, which, as Art Dudley wrote in his April 2020 review of the Luxman CL-1000 preamplifier, "suggests a manufacturer who gives a shit about the customer and who realizes that anyone who spends this much money on a single audio product might be presumed to have more than a passing interest in how the thing works."[2]

Setup

Once secured in my audio rack, it was a joy to slide my left hand over the L-509Z's silken casework as my right hand removed the rubbery plastic caps that protect the back-panel RCA and XLR jacks. The L-509Z is beautiful to behold and pleasant to operate.

Sigmund suggested 200 hours of break-in for the L-509Z, and he wasn't kidding. It sounded confused and bloated on initial hookup—I feared something was broken. But after two weeks of constant streaming, it had come into its own.

I experimented with the tone controls and found the efficacy of the "Line Straight option," which bypasses the tone controls, to be mostly recording or whim dependent—not sure which. Generally, activating Line Straight made music sound cleaner, better focused, well organized, and orderly but perhaps a little rigid. With Line Straight disengaged, music was less tidy and seemed to fill up the room with sound more easily. I mostly stuck with Line Straight for its exacting sonic signature.

Alongside Mono, Mute, Phase Reverse, and Subsonic, the L-509Z offers Loudness, which increased low-end weight to a greater degree than any '80s era integrated I remember. Engaging Loudness was like wrapping the music in a soggy wool sweater; I liked it, but it made me break out in a rash. Increasing bass via the tone controls didn't achieve the same deep-in-a-sauna effect that the Loudness feature did. Some of these controls are only on the handset.

2 This was Art's last review.—**Jim Austin**

measurements, continued

ohms at 20Hz and 1kHz and 36.3k ohms at 20kHz. In MC High mode, the input impedance was the specified 100 ohms across the audioband. The impedance in MC Low mode is specified as 40 ohms; my measurements were inconsequentially different, at 52 ohms at 20Hz and 42 ohms at higher frequencies. The maximum gain at 1kHz was very high from the loudspeaker outputs: 80.5dB in MM mode, 98.45dB in MC High mode, 106dB in MC Low mode. The maximum gains were all 10dB lower from the headphone outputs and 29dB lower from the Preamplifier outputs.

The phono input's RIAA correction (fig.11) had very small boosts in the midrange and high treble, with a slight imbalance toward the left channel (blue trace). Channel separation at 1kHz was 69dB. The wideband, unweighted S/N ratio, ref. 1kHz at 5mV for the MM mode and 500µV for the two MC modes, was assessed with the inputs shorted to ground and with the volume control set to the maximum. It was a good 71dB in MM mode and 66dB in MC High and MC Low modes. Restricting the measurement bandwidth to 22Hz–22kHz increased the MM ratio by 17dB, the MC High ratio by 4.5dB, and the MC Low ratio by 2.5dB. Inserting an A-weighting filter resulted in ratios of 92.6dB in MM, 74.5dB in MC High, and 73dB in MC Low. The phono input is quiet in all three modes.

To be sure I wasn't prematurely clipping the preamplifier output, I examined the phono input's overload margins with the volume control set to –20dB. The margins were impressively high from 20Hz to 20kHz, at 29dB ref. 1kHz at 5mV (MM), 31.5dB ref. 1kHz at 500µV (MC High), and 24dB ref. 1kHz at 500µV (MC Low). The second and third harmonics were the highest in level in the phono input's distortion signature (fig.12), but at –90dB (0.003%) were inconsequential. The levels of the intermodulation products with an equal mix of 19 and 20kHz tones were similarly low.

Overall, Luxman's L-509Z offers excellent measured performance, especially its low-noise, low-distortion, overload-proof phono input.—**John Atkinson**

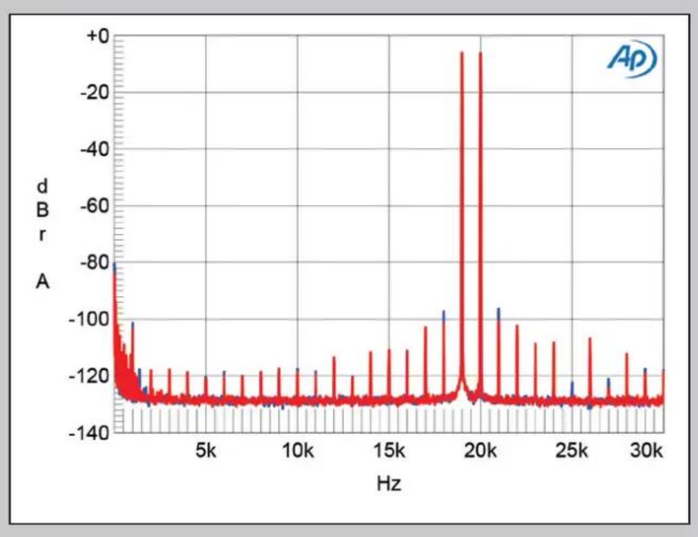

Fig.10 Luxman L-509Z, line input, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC–30kHz, 19+20kHz at 40Wpc peak into 4 ohms (left channel blue, right red, linear frequency scale).

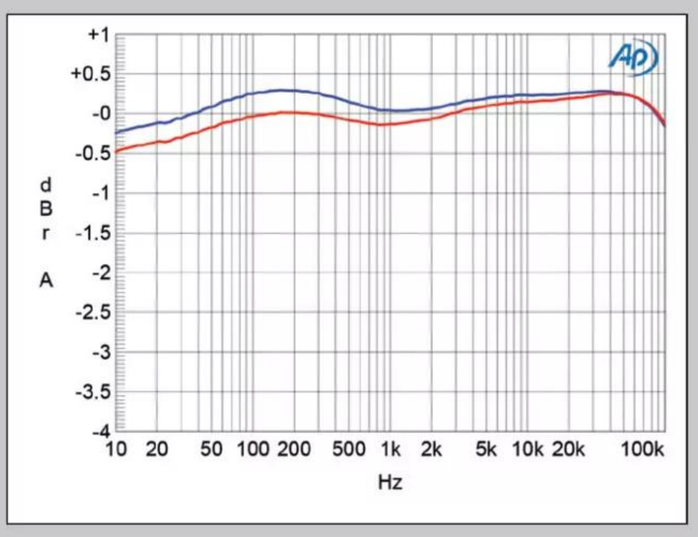

Fig.11 Luxman L-509Z, MM phono input, response with RIAA correction (left channel blue, right red) (0.5dB/vertical div.).

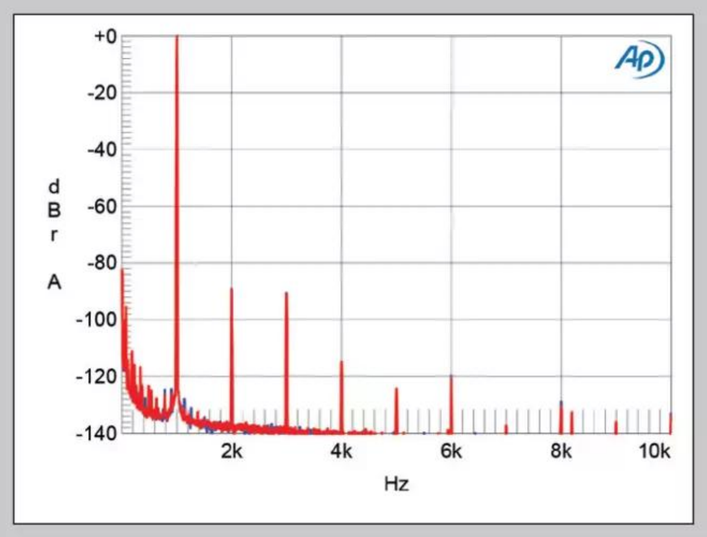

Fig.12 Luxman L-509Z, MM phono input, spectrum of 1kHz sinewave, DC–1kHz, for 40mV input with volume control set to –12dB (left channel blue, right red, linear frequency scale).

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Listening

What immediately struck my ear, brain, and backside, to a degree beyond other tubed or solid state amplifiers I've had in-house, was the size and stability of the L-509Z's presentation. L-509Z images were large, dense, and spatially profound, presented within a soundstage of considerable scale. The L-509Z recreated recordings with nearly life-sized portrayals of musicians, vocalists, and the ambient space in which they were captured—all this in my small listening room. The amp's pure sonorities in the upper mids through the treble captured my ears. This is an amp of brilliant purity and fluid communication. Its squeegee-clean top end allowed cymbals, guitars, pianos, and percussion to resonate and communicate direct to my gut.

Recordings I know well, such as Miles Davis's *Miles in the Sky* (LP, Columbia CS 9628), trumpeter Matthew Halsall and the Gondwana Orchestra's *Into Forever* (LP, Gondwana Records GONDLP013), the Horace Silver Quintet's *Finger Poppin'* (LP, Blue Note 4008), and drummer Kendrick Scott's *Corridors* (LP, Blue Note 4552189) were presented in near-3D on a generous stage with munificent images. In those respects, the Luxman outperformed other integrated or separate amplifiers I've reviewed or had/have in house. My reference PrimaLuna and Shindo Labs tubed electronics sounded tonally sweeter; the Luxman inhabited my room as if it had won an election and was implementing its own agenda.

Playing Ella Fitzgerald's *Ella Swings Lightly* (Verve MGVS 64021) using the Luxman's own phono stage, I relished the delicacy of her voice and responsiveness of the ensemble. Equally, my 1957 Lexington Ave press of Sonny Rollins's Blue Note BLP 1542 (*Sonny Rollins Vol.1*) sounded pungent, powerful, and barking-mad dynamic: I defy any Tone Poet to sound *this* good. The Miles Davis Quintet's *Workin'* (Prestige PRLP 7166) smacked me with its potency, presence, and transparency to the source, especially Paul Chambers's tractor-beam acoustic bass.

The L-509Z was beyond quiet, presumably due to Luxman's noise-suppressing technologies. Beyond its bass-to-midrange neutrality and superpure, upper-tier clarity, the L-509Z had no obvious signature. It was largely music and equipment agnostic. It allowed recordings, whether from streaming or vinyl, to *speak*. It did, however, provide a clear view of the accompanying equipment, most of which *does* have a sonic identity and personality.

I was impressed with the Luxman phono stage. The tubed Manley Chinook had a larger presentation and a more relaxed and swinging sense of flow, but the Luxman stage had serious clarity and drive.

Up to this point, I had done all my listening with the Volti Audio Razz speakers, which, with their high sensitivity coupled with the Luxman's power, superbly charged bass-oriented instruments with drive, and music in general with excellent space and depth, providing consistent delight.

I pulled out the DeVore O/babies. They revealed the Luxman's purity. The DeVore's explicit tweeter, though, requires careful matching. I pushed them closer to the back wall. The resulting sound was crystal-clear and graphic with a tight, solid low end. Music didn't bloom as with the best tube amps, but the L-509Z's presentation left no detail uncovered. The Luxman/DeVore combination was consistently engaging, with superhigh resolution and excellent front-to-back layering.

Seeking synergy closer to that of the Luxman/Volti audio pairing, I invited the venerable, tried-and-true Spendor BC-1s to my even more venerable (circa-1860) tenement apartment.

In his October 1978 review of the Spendor BC-1, J. Gordon Holt wrote, "Its assets include truly remarkable reproduction of depth and superb imaging and scale. ... Despite their manifest shortcomings, these speakers can recreate the *gestalt* of live music like few systems—so well, in fact, that we found ourselves digging out old records we hadn't listened to for years and enjoying them for their content as well as for their naturalness. ... Summing up, then, we would characterize the Spendor BC-1 as a music lover's speaker system rather than an audiophile's system."

I wish he could have heard them with the Luxman.

The Luxman didn't overcome the BC-1's wooly bass, but as Holt stated, music sounded live and natural; the Luxman driving the Spendors was a natural fit, like Mingus's bass with Dannie Richmond's drums. The duo made music feel good, effortless, and fun. Records pulled me into a large, deep stage, liquid yet punchy and large in scale. I could've listened to this jam all night.

That little speaker with the big voice, the GoldenEar BRX, also sounded alive and liberated when driven by the L-509Z. The amp paired smoothly with the speaker's expressive folded-ribbon tweeter and 6" mid/woofer, providing a luminous stage with dead-center focus and an airy, ambient glow. Playing *Coleman Hawkins with the Red Garland Trio* (LP, Prestige Swingville SVLP 2001), the master tenor player sounded relaxed and airy, guttural and grooving, the other trio positioned a step or two behind him on the stage. The Luxman provided a swinging, happy gestalt that moved and liberated this listener.

Conclusion

Some amplifiers make you work to understand their meaning and message. Others shout their personalities like "Swifties" about to see their heroine. The Luxman L-509Z never shouts, barks, or begs. Its message is clarity, balance, coherence, seamlessness, quietude, and a certain invisibility—in keeping, I believe, with a Japanese audio aesthetic of delivering music artifact free, above all else.

As Luxman's evolving noise-suppression technologies make the company's amplifiers more silent, what is left behind is purity and focus. The L-509Z builds on tradition without losing the plot. It's an exacting integrated amplifier with a good phono stage, a bevy of control options, and plenty of power. The Japanese company's flagship integrated merits a "Sai-kōkyū" designation. We call it Class A. ■

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Analog sources VPI Avenger Direct turntable, VPI Fatboy tonearm, Hana Umami Blue MC cartridge.
Digital sources HoloAudio May DAC, Sonore opticalRendu, Roon Nucleus+, Small Green Computer power supply, TRENDnet switch, Apple iPad mini.
Integrated amplifier Shindo Allegro, PrimaLuna EVO 400.
Preamplifier Sugden LA-4.
Power amplifiers Pass Labs XA-25, LKV Research PWR-3, Shindo Haut Brion.
Loudspeakers DeVore Fidelity O/baby, GoldenEar BRX, Volti Audio Razz, Spendor BC-1.
Cables Interconnects: AudioQuest Pegasus, Triode Wire Labs Spirit II. Speaker: Analysis Plus Silver Apex Speaker, Auditorium 23. AC: Triode Wire Labs Obsession NCF.
Accessories Pro-Ject VC-S2 ALU Record Cleaning Machine, Audio Desk Systeme Vinyl Cleaner Pro, Hunt Mark 6 Carbon Fiber Record Cleaning Brush, IsoTek EVO3 Aquarius line conditioner, Salamander five-tier Archetype rack (2), IKEA Aptitlig bamboo chopping boards (under turntable, preamp, power, and integrated amps), mahogany blocks (three to a stack) under boards.—**Ken Micallef**

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HERB REICHERT

Ferrum Wandla

D/A PROCESSOR

I can roll out of bed and install a $10,000 phono cartridge while finishing my coffee, but I postpone DAC installations until I am in the exact right mood to handle the potential stress—especially DACs with a touch screen and a complex menu. To my delight, Ferrum Audio's new Wandla digital converter was completely stress-free to install. It took only minutes to connect the USB-C cable, the Cardas Audio Clear Beyond interconnects, and 24V DC power adapter.

Connecting the power adapter caused a power-switch symbol to appear on the front panel touch screen. The moment I touched it, I smiled like the Cheshire Cat, because I saw a USB-C symbol, a loudspeaker symbol, three dots in a box, and a volume control bargraph. That told me the Wandla recognized my chosen input and was waiting for a signal. All that remained was for my Roon Nucleus+ server to recognize and enable the new DAC, which it did without prodding or reprimand. For me, that was a *wow* moment, a good start to what promised to be an interesting review.

I reviewed Ferrum's first product, the trailblazing HYPSOS stand-alone power supply, and their second, the OOR headphone amp,[1] and found them both to be smart and good-sounding—an auspicious start for this new company from Eastern Europe. These first products led with style and followed with innovation and thoroughly considered engineering. The software control in the HYPSOS felt like it was designed by engineers who knew what they were doing and finished the job. In today's feature-obsessed marketplace, that's rare.

Ferrum products are made in Poland at an engineering and manufacturing company called HEM that was founded at the beginning of this century. For its first 20 years, HEM was a highly respected "OEM" making digital and amplification products for other companies. The HYPSOS was their first product under their own Ferrum banner. Since my OOR and HYPSOS reports, Ferrum has introduced two more products: the $1795 ERCO DAC/headphone amp and the $2795 Wandla DAC/preamp, which I will be describing here.

Description

The Ferrum Wandla is a two-channel digital/analog converter that comes in a stylish-looking, modestly proportioned chassis measuring 8.6" wide, 8.1" deep, and 2" high and weighing only 3.9lb. The Wandla's chassis matches cosmetically and stacks perfectly with Ferrum's HYPSOS power supply, which is recommended with the

1 Both were covered in Gramophone Dreams #57, which you can read at stereophile.com/content/gramophone-dreams-57-ferrum-oor-headphone-amplifier-and-hypsos-power-supply.

SPECIFICATIONS

Description Digital/analog converter based around ESS Sabre's ES9038PRO chip. It is also a single-input (RCA) analog preamplifier. Digital inputs: AES3 – PCM up to 196kHz, 24 bits, DoP 64, TosLink – PCM up to 96kHz, 24 bits, RCA – PCM up to 196kHz, 24 bits, DoP 64, USB-C – PCM up to 768kHz, 32 bits, DSD 256, ARC – PCM up to 196kHz, 24 bits, I²S – PCM up to 768kHz, 32 bits, DSD 256. Plus, MQA decoder and renderer (all inputs). Output impedance: XLR – 44 ohms, RCA – 22 ohms. Power consumption: 10W (idle), 15W (max).
Dimensions 8.6" (217mm) W × 8.1" (206mm) D × 2" (50mm) H. Weight: 3.9lb (1.8kg).
Serial number of unit reviewed 06023 – 00295.
Manufactured in Poland.
Price $2795. Approximate number of dealers: 30+.
Warranty 3 years.
Manufacturer
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Aleje Jerozolimskie 475, 05-800 Pruszków, Poland.
Tel: +48 22 823 72 38.
Web: ferrum.audio.
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rose

Wandla but not required.

The Wandla's conversion job is handled by an ESS Sabre ES-9038PRO chip, which, according to the ESS data sheet,[2] "handles up to 32-bit 768kHz PCM, and DSD256 via DoP and native DSD1024 data in master or slave timing modes. Custom sound signature is supported via a fully programmable FIR filter with 7 presets."

The Wandla offers three of those ESS filters plus two "HQ" filters created for Ferrum by renowned filter maker Signalyst, known for their work on the HQPlayer app. These filters are called HQ Apodizing and HQ Gaussian. The others are ESS Linear Phase, ESS Minimum Phase, and ESS Apodizing.

The Wandla sports a full roster of back-panel digital inputs: AES3, supporting PCM rates up to 24/192 and DoP up to DSD 64; TosLink (PCM up to 24/96); electrical S/PDIF on RCA (PCM up to 24/192); USB-C (PCM up to 32/768, DSD up to DSD 256); HDMI ARC (PCM up to 24/192); and I²S (PCM up to 32/768, DSD 256). The Wandla offers full MQA decoding.

The Wandla has one analog input; the single-ended signal stays analog and becomes "truly balanced" internally; the Wandla's analog circuitry is fully balanced. There are two analog output pairs, one RCA and one XLR.

In a *Positive Feedback* interview,[3] Ferrum Founder and CEO Marcin Hamerla stated, "Perhaps the most important part of the

2 See esstech.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/ES9038PRO-Datasheet-v3.7.pdf.

3 See positive-feedback.com/high-fidelity/ferrum-wandla-dac.

MEASUREMENTS

I measured the Ferrum Wandla with my Audio Precision SYS2722 system (see the January 2008 "As We See It"[1]). As HR had told me he much preferred the sound with the optional Ferrum HYP-SOS power supply, I performed a complete set of measurements using that supply (set to the appropriate 24.0V), then repeated some of the tests with the wall wart.

Looking first at the Wandla's behavior as a D/A processor, Apple's USB Prober utility identified the Wandla as "Ferrum WANDLA" from "HEM" with the serial number string "12 mb=HEM014964;serce=HEM015368." The USB port operated in the optimal isochronous asynchronous mode, and Apple's AudioMIDI utility revealed that the Wandla accepted 24- and 32-bit integer data sampled at all rates from 44.1kHz to 768kHz. The AES3 and S/PDIF inputs accepted data sampled at rates up to 192kHz. HR had told me that he heard glitches with the Wandla decoding MQA data. I also found this to be the case. Something else I noticed was that while the front-panel display correctly showed the incoming data's sample rate for all rates of 48kHz and above, with 44.1kHz data, it sometimes said "48kHz." Nevertheless, the measured behavior with 44.1kHz data was correct.

With the Digital Input Trim set to "0dB," the Wandla's maximum output level at 1kHz with the balanced outputs feeding a high 100k ohm load was 10.3V. The Trim control operated in accurate 1dB steps down to the minimum setting of "–12dB." As usual, the maximum level from the unbalanced outputs was half those from the balanced

1 See stereophile.com/content/measurements-maps-precision.

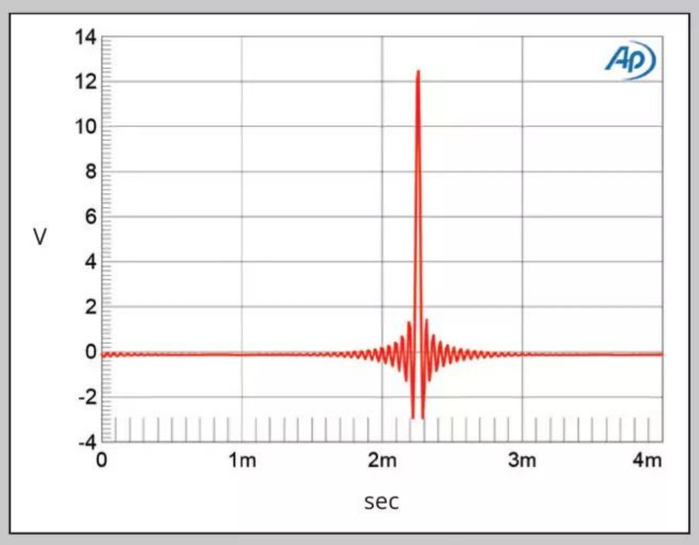

Fig.1 Ferrum Wandla, HQ Gauss filter, impulse response (one sample at 0dBFS, 44.1kHz sampling, 4ms time window).

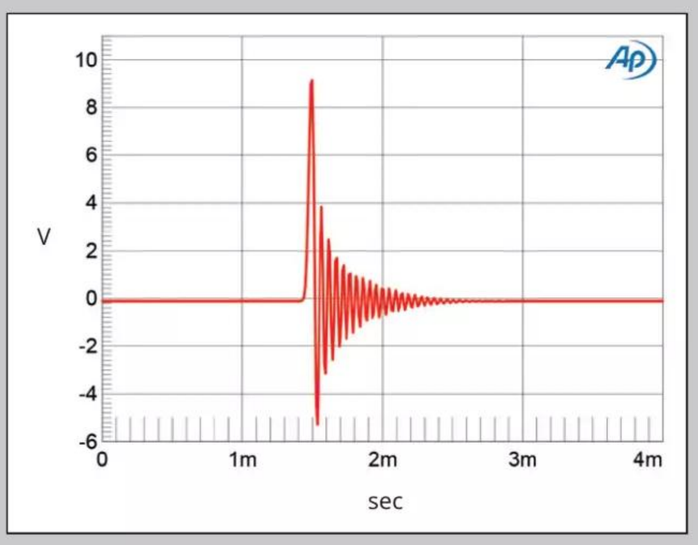

Fig.2 Ferrum Wandla, ESS Min-Ph. filter, impulse response (one sample at 0dBFS, 44.1kHz sampling, 4ms time window).

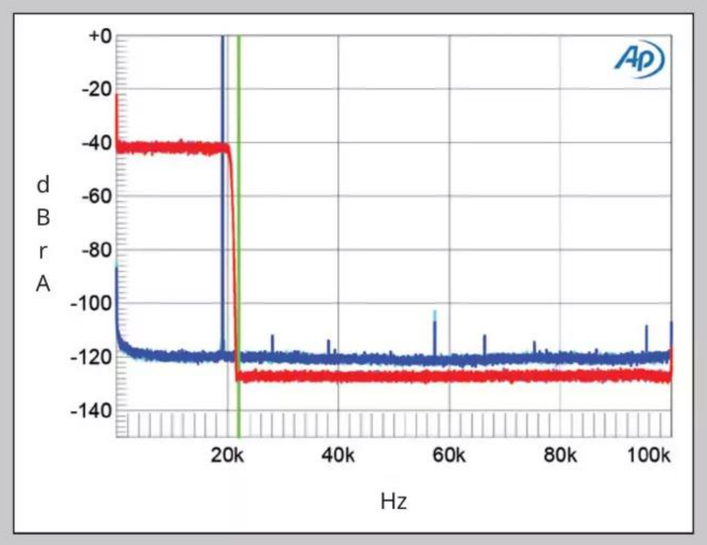

Fig.3 Ferrum Wandla, HQ Gauss filter, wideband spectrum of white noise at –4dBFS (left channel red, right magenta) and 19.1kHz tone at 0dBFS (left blue, right cyan) into 100k ohms with data sampled at 44.1kHz (20dB/vertical div.).

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During my auditions, I presumed that the main cause of the Wandla's high ease-of-use factor was that "All software, including the USB interface, was developed in-house at HEM." Say amen, brothers. The warranty is for three years.

Listening with line-wart supply

Before the Wandla arrived, I had already decided to start my auditions with compositions featuring impact and rhythm, with drums playing heavy beats *loud*. I decided this because DACs employing sigma-delta chips, and especially the esteemed ES9038PRO used in the Ferrum, have higher punch, slam, and PRaT factors than most NOS R-2R DACs, which in my systems show good PRaT—but not conspicuous PRaT—and direct my attention more toward lyrics and melody.

I started this month's auditions with the Wandla connected directly to the Feliks Audio Envy 300B headphone amplifier, which I auditioned for this month's Gramophone Dreams column. I opened the Envy's volume control to full and operated the Wandla's with its sturdy palm-sized remote. This simple system exhaled resolution and clarity.

I played the marching Mamady Keïta composition "Djabara" off Keïta and Sewa Kan's album *Wassolon* (24/96 FLAC, Mamady Keita/Qobuz). This drum-powered track revved my brain completely. The Wandla playing *Wassolon* using its wire-wart power supply seemed well-suited for this kind of music, as were HiFi-Man's reference-quality HE-R10P planar magnetic headphones, which, in concert with the DAC and amplifier, brought a high level of verity to *Wassolon*'s voices, drum, and bird sounds.

In lieu of audience applause or jangling keys, I use bird sounds to test a component's ability to reproduce complex, low-level harmonics. With the Ferrum DAC, these drum and bird sounds felt immediate and vital, but the body of the sound felt brittle and pinched.

Drums enjoy being sigma-delta-ed, and so do pianos. The

measurements, continued

outputs. The Wandla preserved absolute polarity (ie, was noninverting) from both output types. The balanced output impedance was the specified 44 ohms at all audio frequencies; the unbalanced output impedance was the specified 22 ohms.

The Wandla offers a choice of five upsampling reconstruction filters: two from the creator of HQ Player, called HQ Gauss and HQ Apod., and three included in the ESS Sabre ES9038PRO DAC chip, called ESS Lin-Ph., ESS Min-Ph., and ESS Apod. Fig.1 shows the Wandla's impulse response with the HQ Gauss filter and 44.1kHz data. It is typical of a conventional linear-phase filter, with symmetrical ringing before and after the single full-scale sample. The impulse responses of the HQ Apod., ESS Lin-Ph., and ESS Apod. filters were identical to that of the HQ Gauss filter. The odd man out was the ESS Min-Ph. filter, which had a typical minimum-phase impulse response, with all the ringing following the single high sample (fig.2).

The magenta and red traces in fig.3 show the HQ Gauss filter's ultrasonic rolloff with data sampled at 44.1kHz. (The HQ Apod. filter's behavior was identical.) They reach full stop-band attenuation at just below half the sample rate (this indicated by the vertical green line), with complete suppression of the aliased image at 25kHz of a full-scale tone at 19.1kHz (cyan, blue). The harmonics associated with the 19.1kHz tone all lie at or below –108dB. These harmonics are a little higher in level with the three ESS filters (fig.4). Other than the ESS Apod. filter, full stop-band attenuation is reached at 24kHz, with the aliased image at 25kHz suppressed by 90dB.

Fig.5 shows the HQ Gauss filter's frequency response with data sampled at 44.1, 96, and 192kHz. With 44.1kHz and 96kHz data, the output rolls off sharply just below half the sample rate. With 192kHz

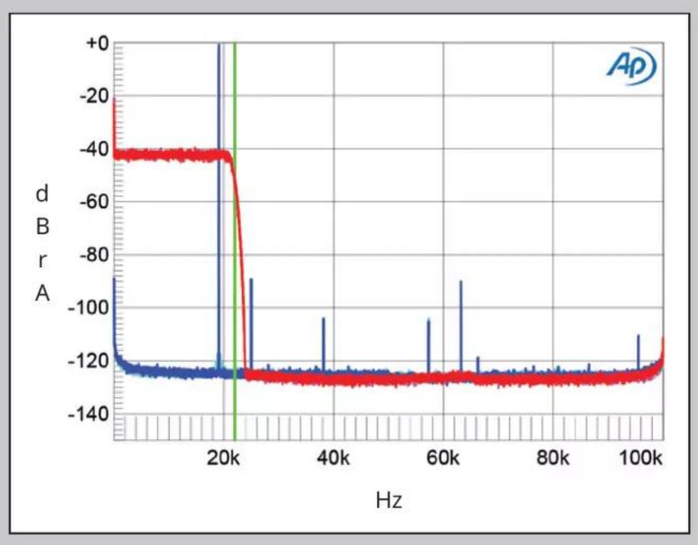

Fig.4 Ferrum Wandla, ESS Lin-Ph. filter, wideband spectrum of white noise at –4dBFS (left channel red, right magenta) and 19.1kHz tone at 0dBFS (left blue, right cyan) into 100k ohms with data sampled at 44.1kHz (20dB/vertical div.).

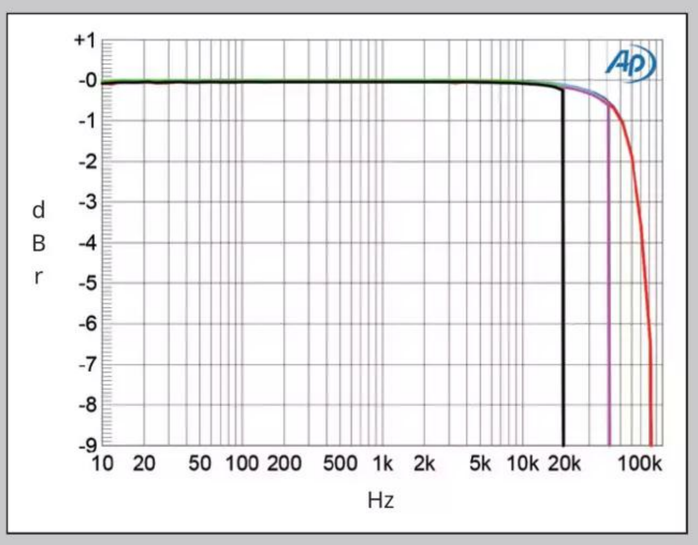

Fig.5 Ferrum Wandla, HQ Gauss filter, frequency response at –12dBFS into 100k ohms with data sampled at: 44.1kHz (left channel green, right gray), 96kHz (left cyan, right magenta), and 192kHz (left blue, right red) (1dB/vertical div.).

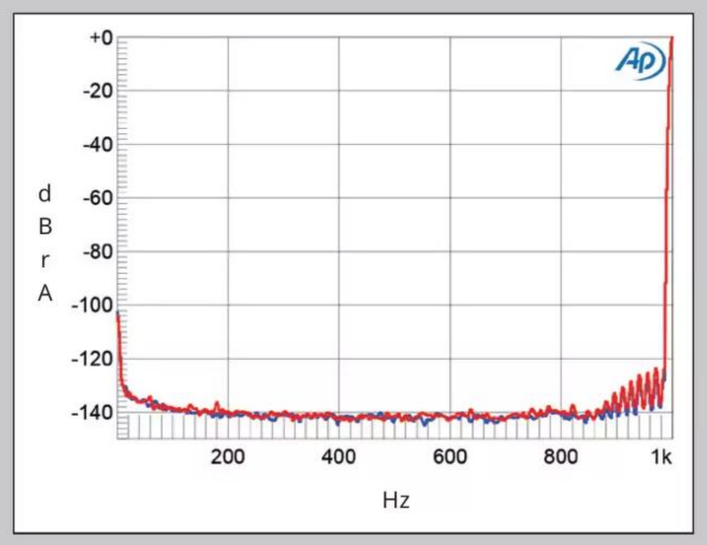

Fig.6 Ferrum Wandla, spectrum of 1kHz sinewave, DC–1kHz, at 0dBFS with HYPSOS supply, volume control set to the maximum, and gain trim set to "0dB" (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).

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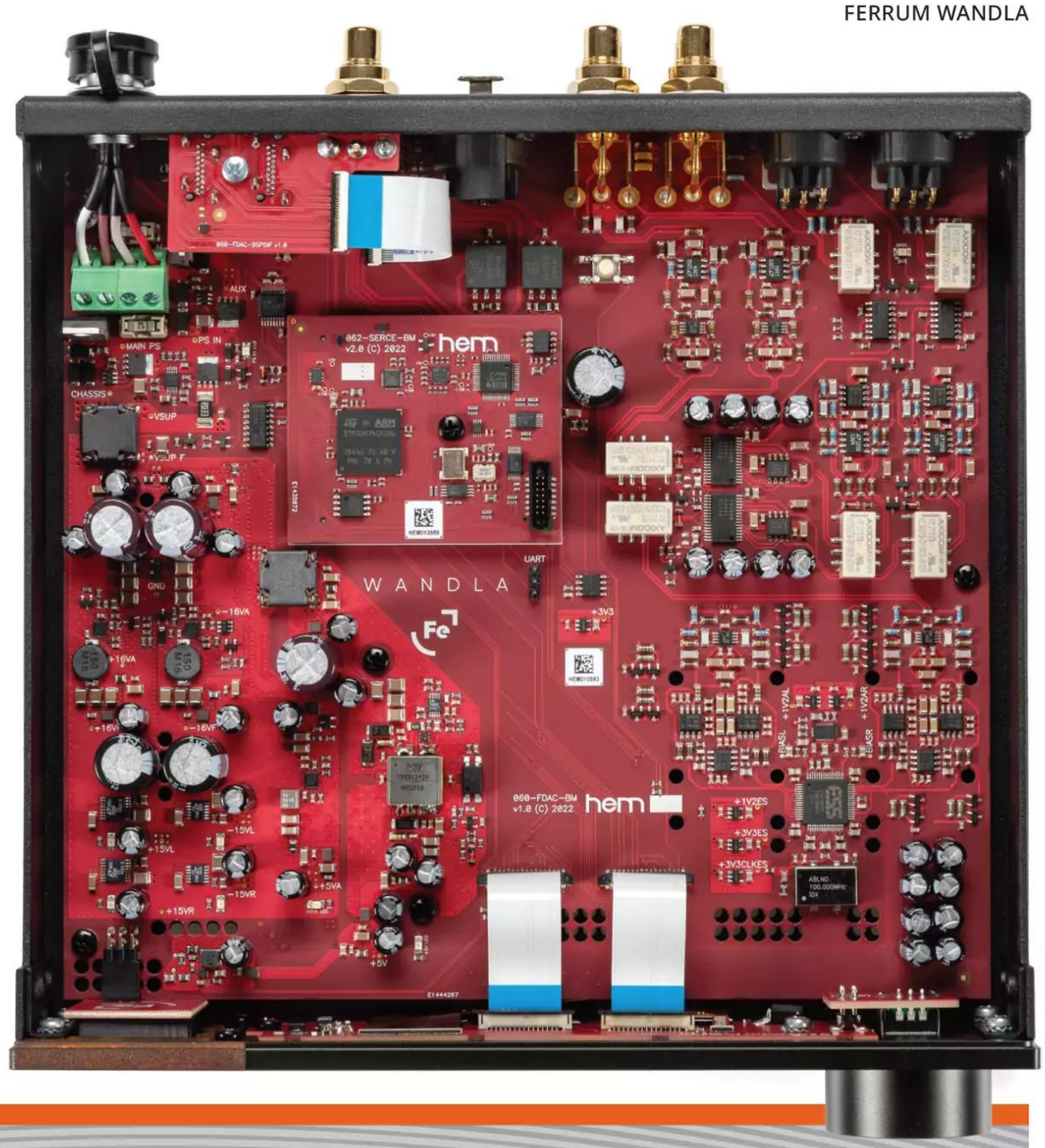
Wandla driving the Feliks Envy powering my HiFiMan R10P planar magnetic headphones turned high-speed rhythms, fast turns, and airy piccolos into a delirious aural fantasy. My lifelong crush, Martha Argerich, delivered a dazzling version of Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker Suite*, arranged by Nicolas Economou, on *Winter Piano* (16/44.1 FLAC, UME/Tidal). PRaT was off the charts. Thrills came easily. But compared to the considerably more expensive Denafrips Terminator Plus, melodies felt inhibited, and there was a subtle but distinct metallic hardness that infused the body of every note. Reverb tails were shortened. When I double-checked these observations with JPS Labs' Diana headphones and through my Heretic AD614 floorspeakers, that metallic hardness was still there. Those experiences inspired me to connect Ferrum's HYPSOS power supply.

Help from the HYPSOS

My Cheshire Cat smile returned when I connected the Wandla to Ferrum's hybrid digital-analog HYPSOS power supply. The OLED display lit up, indicating that the HYPSOS had recognized the Wandla and was feeding it 24V DC without stress or menu-reading meltdowns. (The Wandla will work with any DC voltage between 22V and 30V.) I only like digital when the sound is stress free, and when the software makes my life easier, not more cussingly convoluted. The Wandla-HYPSOS hookup made menu-surfing a pleasure.



measurements, continued

data, the response continues the initial gentle rolloff below 40kHz with 96kHz data, then rolls off quickly above 80kHz. Channel separation was superb, at >120dB in both directions below 3kHz, decreasing to a still superb 114dB at 20kHz. The Wandla's noisefloor with the HYPSOS (fig.6) was free from AC supply–related spuriae, but there are low-level sidebands visible around the spectral spike that represents a full-scale 1kHz tone at 2V into 100k ohms. These appear to be spaced at 35Hz, and they were also present when I repeated this analysis with the Wandla powered by the wall-wart supply. The random noisefloor is low with the HYPSOS supply but 6dB lower with the wall wart.

The red trace in fig.7 plots the error in the Ferrum's analog output level as a 24-bit, 1kHz digital tone stepped down from 0dBFS to –140dBFS. The error is <1dB down to –136dB, which implies very high resolution. An increase in bit depth from 16 to 24, with dithered data representing a 1kHz tone at –90dBFS, dropped the Wandla's noisefloor by 27dB (fig.8). This implies a resolution between 20 and 21 bits, which is up there with the best-measuring processors. When I played undithered data representing a tone at exactly –90.31dBFS, the waveform was symmetrical, with negligible DC offset, and the three DC voltage levels described by the data were free from noise (fig.9). With undithered 24-bit data (not shown), the Wandla output a clean sinewave, even at this very low signal level.

The Wandla produced very low levels of harmonic distortion with full-scale digital data into the high 100k ohm load. The third harmonic was the only harmonic visible above the noisefloor; it lay at just –120dB (0.0001%). While the level of the

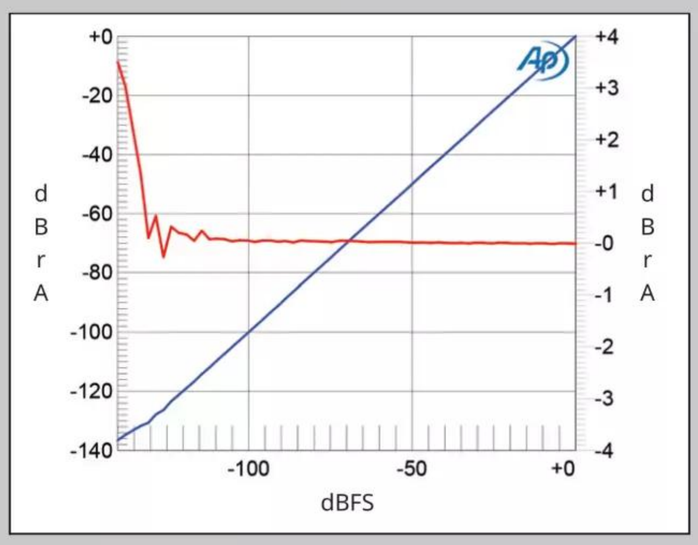


Fig.7 Ferrum Wandla with HYPSOS supply, 1kHz output level vs 24-bit data level in dBFS (blue, 20dB/vertical div.); linearity error (red, 1dB/vertical div.).

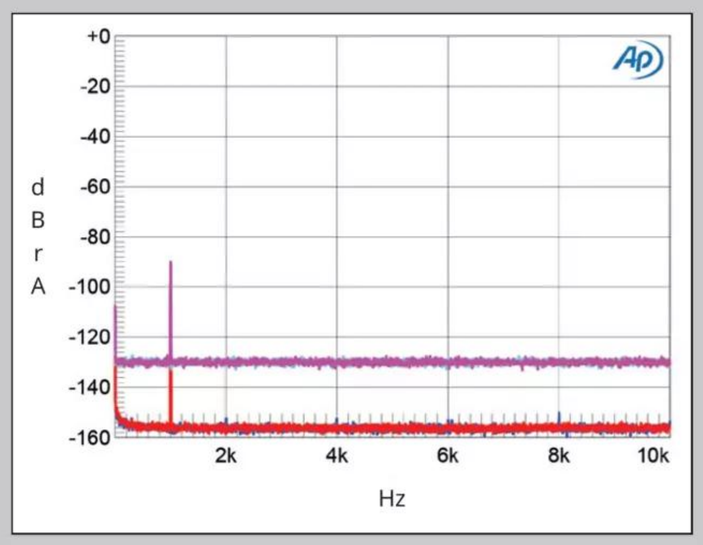


Fig.8 Ferrum Wandla with HYPSOS supply, spectrum with noise and spuriae of dithered 1kHz tone at –90dBFS with: 16-bit data (left channel cyan, right magenta), 24-bit data (left blue, right red) (20dB/vertical div.).

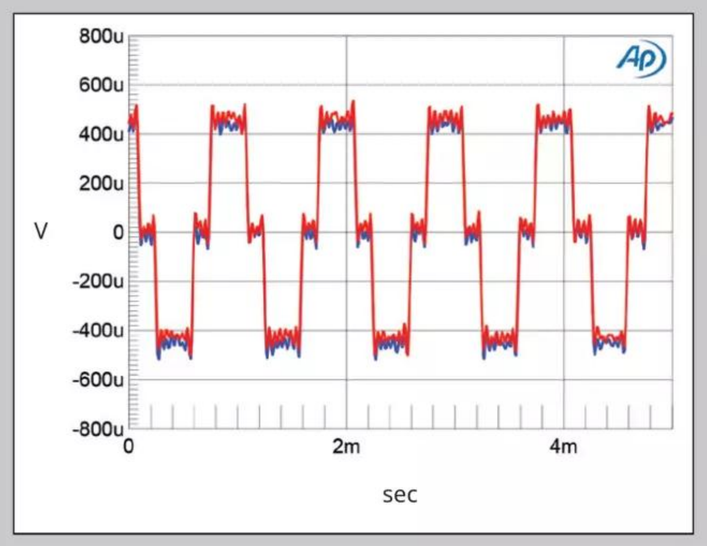


Fig.9 Ferrum Wandla with HYPSOS supply, waveform of undithered 1kHz sinewave at –90.31dBFS, 16-bit data (left channel blue, right red).

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The $1195 HYPSOS mated instantly with the $2795 Wandla, creating a hip-looking two-chassis $3990 DAC. The HYPSOS's effect on sound quality was immediately obvious. That hardness was relieved. Martha Argerich's *Winter Piano* became supple and distinctly more three-dimensional with clear, vibrating open spaces between notes.

This power supply upgrade is something I wish every audiophile could experience. It is not subtle, and it leaves no doubt about how much a component's source of energy affects the flow, luster, and body of reproduced music. I am curious to see if John Atkinson will detect a difference in the Wandla's measured performance using the optional HYPSOS.

Checking for accuracy of tone, I played violinist Midori's intense Bartók Violin Concerto No.1 Op.21, with Zubin Mehta and the Berlin Philharmonic (16/44.1 MQA Sony Classical/Tidal). My secondary goal was to compare the Wandla's MQA rendering to my memories of how spectacularly the dCS Bartók Apex played it—but alas! The Midori Bartok sounded off. The Wandla's touch screen indicated that the Wandla was switching between MQA and straight 16/44.1, and that's what it sounded like. I checked Roon, and it showed it was inputting "MQA Studio." I tried another MQA file, this one featuring French pianist Samson Francois playing Debussy (16/44.1 MQA Parlophone/Tidal), and it behaved the same way. After raising my eyebrows and shrugging my shoulders, I moved on to a 16/44.1 version of Samson's Debussy on Qobuz, and there, the sound was nothing short of glorious: full, bright, alive, and colorful. Listening with the Feliks Envy and the HiFiMan R10P planar magnetic headphones, the Wandla's tone was good, emphasizing the tinkly side of the keyboard. With Meze Elite planar magnetics, the left-center of the

measurements, continued

third harmonic rose to –91dB (0.003%) when I reduced the load impedance to the punishing 600 ohms (fig.10), the third and higher harmonics were at or below –100dB. Intermodulation distortion with an equal mix of 19 and 20kHz tones, each at –6dBFS, was also very low (fig.11), with the difference tone at 1kHz lying at –130dB (0.00003%). This graph was taken with the HQ Gauss filter; the HQ Apod. filter behaved identically. The difference product was similarly low with the three ESS filters, but with them, aliased images of the primary tone can be been at –93dB (fig.12). Again, the Wandla wasn't fazed by the 600 ohm load, the intermodulation products remaining at the same ultralow level as they were into 100k ohms.

The Wandla offered excellent rejection of word-clock jitter via all its digital inputs. Fig.13 shows the spectrum of the Wandla's output when it was fed high-level 16-bit J-Test data via TosLink. All the odd-order harmonics of the undithered low-frequency, LSB-level squarewave lie at the correct levels, though the central spike that represents the high-level tone at one-quarter the sample rate (Fs/4) is surrounded by low-level sidebands spaced at the same 35Hz intervals I found in my low-frequency noisefloor analysis.

The single-ended analog line input preserved absolute polarity. With the Ferrum's Analog Input Gain set to 0dB and the volume control set to its maximum, the voltage gain at 1kHz measured 5.82dB from the balanced outputs and –0.21dB from the single-ended outputs. The Input Gain can be increased in accurate 1dB steps up to 12dB. The input impedance is specified as 47k ohms; I measured 45k ohms at 20Hz and 1kHz, 39.5k ohms at 20kHz. The analog frequency response was flat from 10Hz to 50kHz and down by –0.9dB at 200kHz. Channel separation was

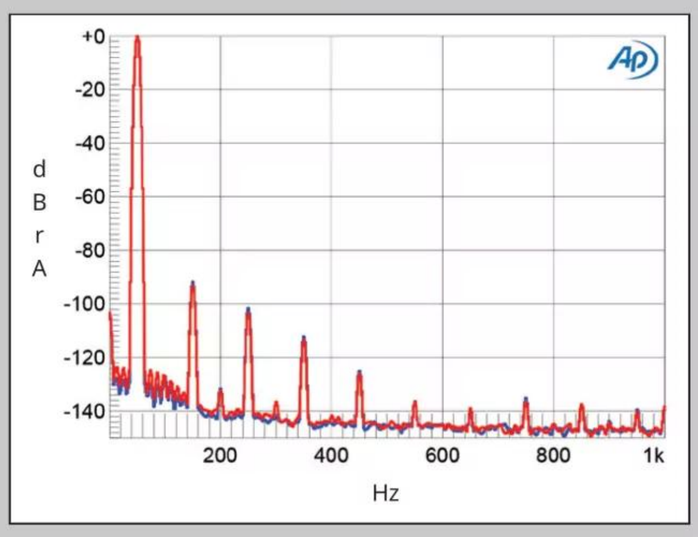

Fig.10 Ferrum Wandla with HYPSOS supply, 24-bit data, spectrum of 50Hz sinewave, DC–1kHz, at 0dBFS into 100k ohms (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).

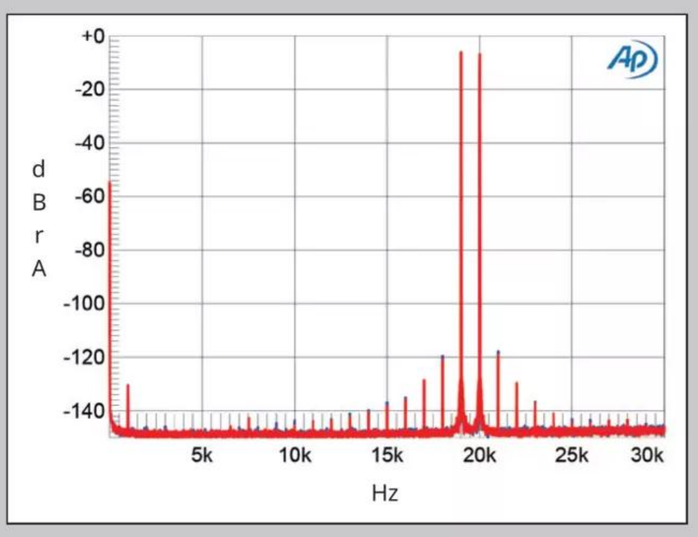

Fig.11 Ferrum Wandla with HYPSOS supply, HQ Gauss filter, 24/44.1 data, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC–30kHz, 19+20kHz at 0dBFS into 300 ohms (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).

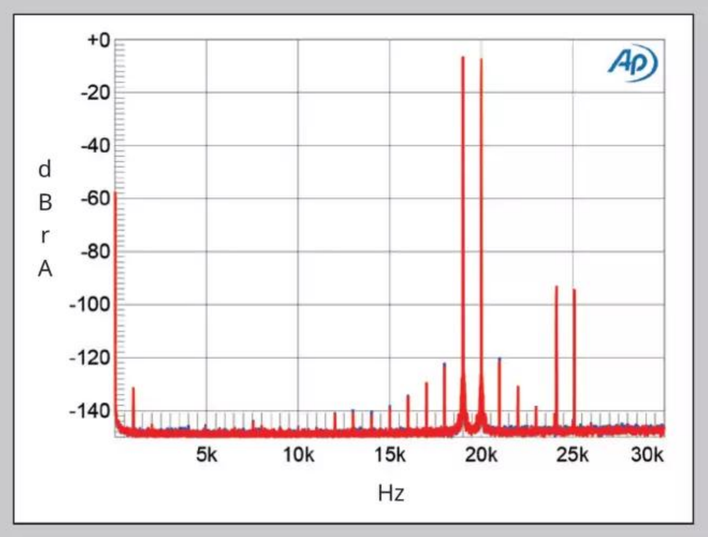

Fig.12 Ferrum Wandla with HYPSOS supply, ESS Lin-Ph. filter, 24/44.1 data, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC–30kHz, 19+20kHz at 0dBFS into 300 ohms (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).

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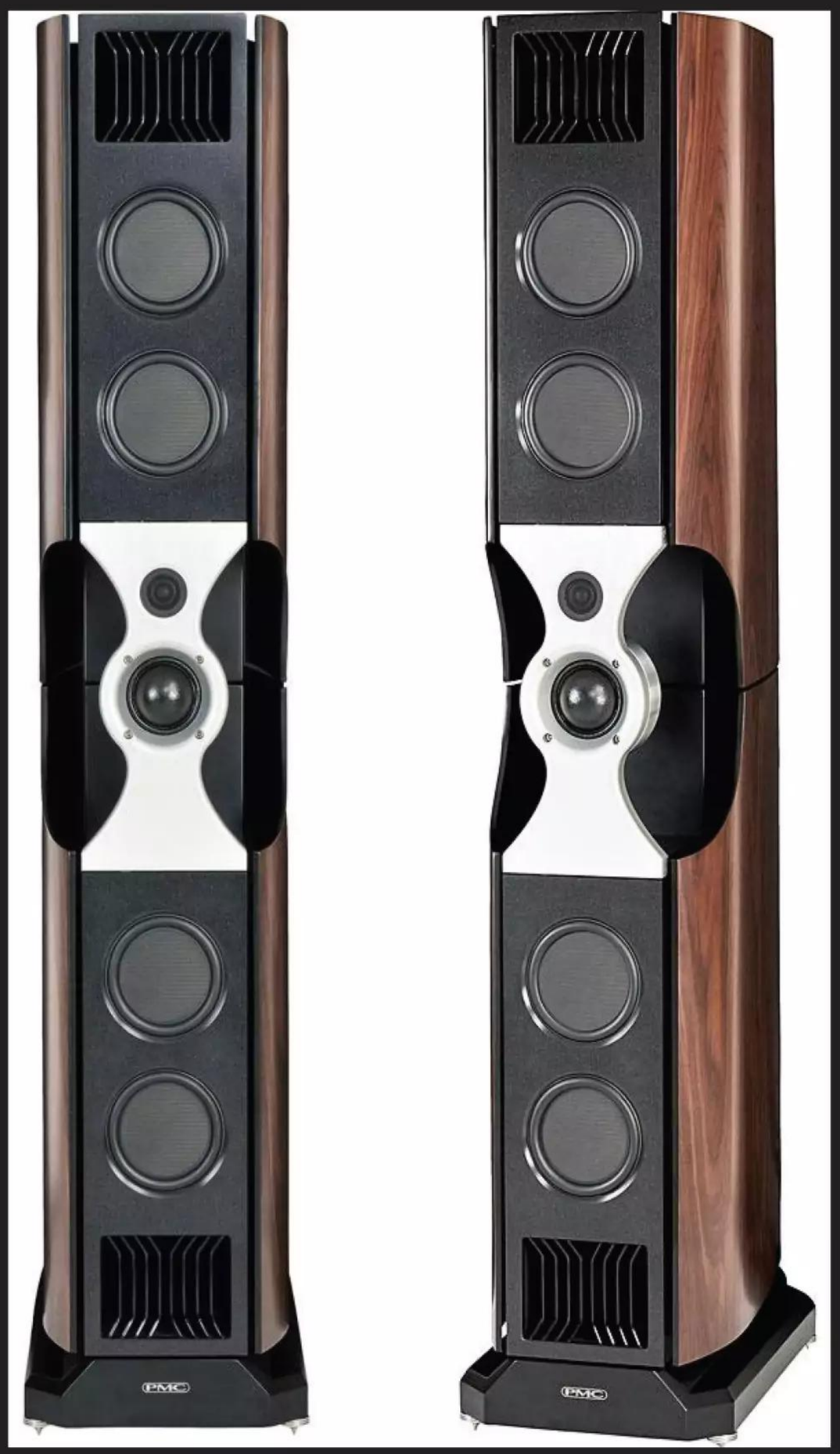

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keyboard came forward, adding weight to the sound. The Elite's refined resolution made sustain and reverb tails into events worth savoring. The JPS Labs Diana headphones added more torque to the bass region.

Next, I used Cardas's all-natural Clear Beyond interconnects and speaker cables to connect the Wandla directly to the RCA inputs of the Parasound Halo A 21+ amplifier driving the Heretic AD614 speakers. This is my highest-resolving, most uncompressed amp-speaker combo, and it gave me the feeling I was experiencing the "real" Wandla, which now sounded clear and solid and considerably more color-saturated than it had with the wire-wart supply. In my notes, I wrote "Studio sound with flair!"

The next thing I noticed with the 300W A 21+ powering the 97dB/2.83V/m–sensitive Heretics was deeper, denser bass from the left side of Samson Francois's keyboard. The effect of this weightier bass was to put all 88 piano keys into a smoother octave-to-octave balance. With the HYPSOS powering the Wandla, voices and instruments displayed a more complete and natural spectral balance.

What stood out with this simple, Ferrum-sourced sound system was how its reportage seemed so straightforward and unadorned. No flavorizing. No luminous wowie-zowie. But just enough glow and punch and focused resolve to be satisfying with all musical genres.

Like Ferrum's OOR headphone amp, which I reviewed in GD57, the Wandla wears its solid stateness proudly, as a virtue, not something to be suppressed. Respecting that and remembering how much I enjoyed the OOR, I decided to let myself fall into some long listening and enjoy the Ferrum's sound on its own terms. No sooner did I make that decision than I began falling under the Wandla's spell. The more recordings I played, the more the Wandla seemed to come to life.

The older I get, the more I see how audio equipment is like cars: You can't let components sit around getting flat tires. You have to start them up, heat up their oil, and take them for long, high-revving spins. I left the Wandla on 24/7 for the entire month. Every day, it got looser, more athletic, and more right-brain enticing. By the third week, it was *Swan Lake* enabled. So ...

For fun I started my swan-clad ballerina journey with Madness's version of Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*, from the album *One Step Beyond* (16/44.1 FLAC, Rhino–Warner/Qobuz). There were no "baby ballerinas" from the Ballet Russes—just bass-fueled, speeding rhythms and that "heavy heavy monster sound" of mad Brits pogoing between the Heretics. Exactly what I was hoping for.

Filters and voltages

I followed that with a version of *Swan Lake* I've been wanting to enjoy but have not yet connected with: *Tchaikovsky: Ballet Suites* with Mstislav Rostropovich conducting the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra playing *Swan Lake Suite*, Op.20a, recorded in 1996 (24/96 FLAC, Deutsche Grammophon/Qobuz). With the Wandla at its default settings (HD, HQ Apodizing filter, 24V DC), it sounded dry and compressed on loud passages—as it usually does. Then I remembered an email from Ferrum importer Roy Feldstein of

measurements, continued

excellent, at >110dB below 3kHz and still 100dB at 20kHz.

With the Wandla's line input shorted to ground and the volume control set to its maximum with 0dB Analog Input Gain, the wideband, unweighted signal/noise ratio (ref. 1V) measured 73dB in both channels at the balanced outputs. Restricting the measurement bandwidth to the audioband increased that ratio to 99.3dB, and an A-weighting filter increased it further, to 102dB. Increasing the Analog Input Gain by 12dB reduced the unweighted ratios by 10dB. The Ferrum's analog input's low-frequency noisefloor was free from the 35Hz-spaced spuriae that I had found with the digital inputs.

Fig.14 shows how the THD+noise percentage in the balanced output changed as the output voltage into 100k ohms increased. The downward slope below 5V output is due to actual distortion lying below the noisefloor. The distortion starts to rise above that output level but is still extraordinarily low. The balanced output clipped at a very high 20V into this load; the unbalanced output clipped at half that voltage, as expected. The balanced clipping voltage into the punishing 600 ohms load was 16.5V.

The distortion in both output types was extremely low at all audio frequencies, and the second- and third-harmonics lay at or below a vanishingly low –120dB (0.0001%) into high impedances (fig.15). This was the case with both the HYPSOS and wall-wart supplies.

Even when powered by its wall-wart supply, the Ferrum Wandla performed supremely well on the test bench with both analog and digital inputs, especially with the HQ Gauss reconstruction filter. It boasts very high resolution, very low distortion and noise, and a bombproof output stage.—**John Atkinson**

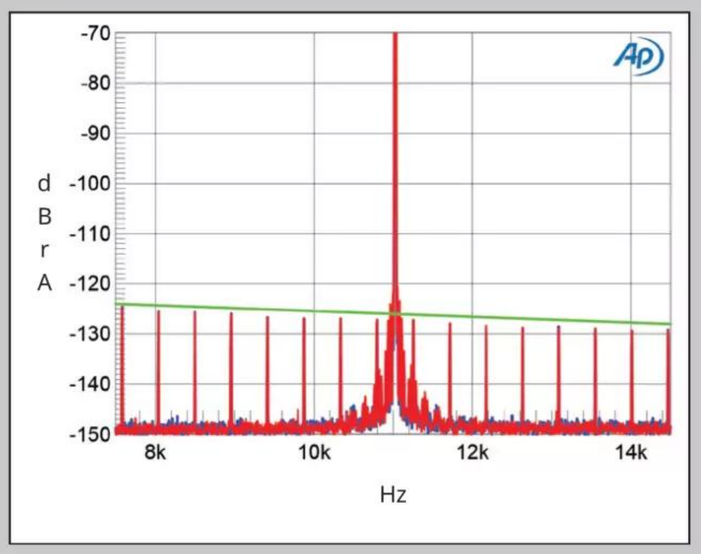

Fig.13 Ferrum Wandla with HYPSOS supply, HQ Gauss filter, high-resolution jitter spectrum of analog output signal, 11.025kHz at –6dBFS, sampled at 44.1kHz with LSB toggled at 229Hz: 16-bit TosLink data (left channel blue, right red). Center frequency of trace, 11.025kHz; frequency range, ±3.5kHz.

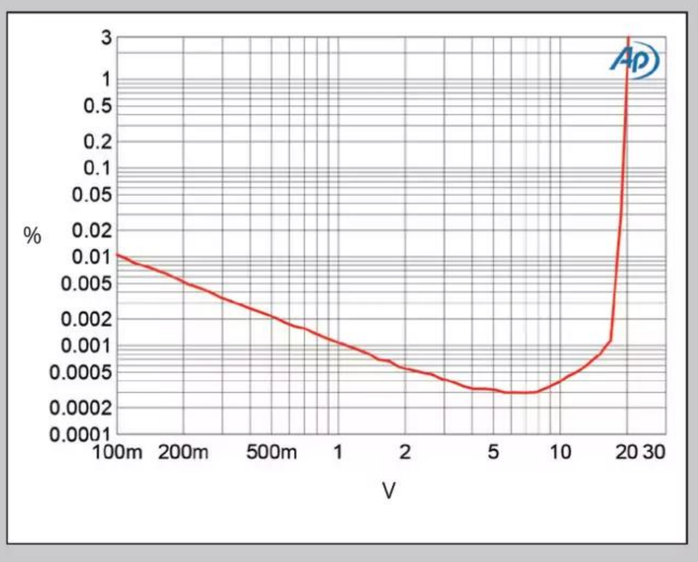

Fig.14 Ferrum Wandla with HYPSOS supply, analog input, THD+N (%) vs 1kHz continuous output power into 8 ohms.

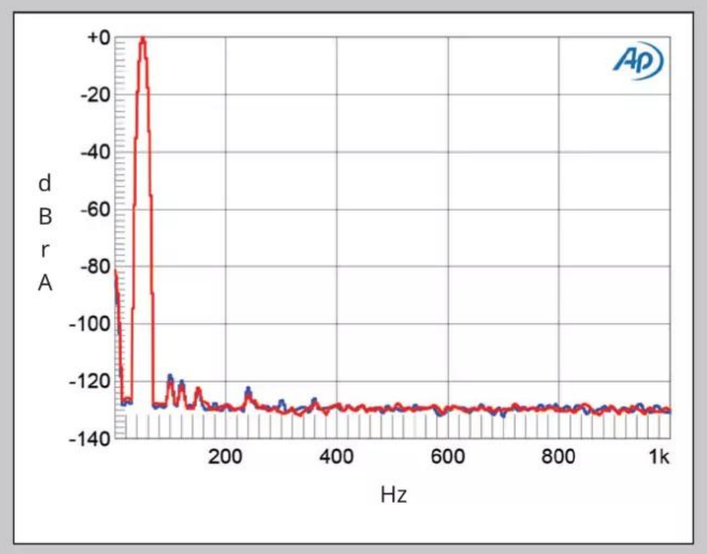

Fig.15 Ferrum Wandla with Hypsos supply, analog input, spectrum of 50Hz sinewave, DC–1kHz, at 2V into 100k ohms (left channel blue, right red; linear frequency scale).

Vana Ltd.: "Have you tried adjusting the voltage in the HYPSOS to match HQ filters? I'd suggest auditioning the HQ Apodizing filter at 22 to 23 volts. The HQ Gaussian filter works better at 26 volts in my system."

The Wandla arrived with its default HQ Apodizing filter engaged and the HYPSOS outputting 24V DC automatically. So, what the hay? I lowered the HYPSOS to 22 volts and tried that Rostropovich-Tchaikovsky again. Deutsche Grammophon's loud-passage compression was still there, but the overall sound had thinned a bit; there was more space and atmosphere in the quiet passages. At 22V DC, the *Ballet Suites* sounded just sweet and open enough to keep my mind focused on Rostropovich conducting the Berlin. This was the first time I listened to this album all the way through.

This 2V reduction in the Wandla's rail voltage made albums with two-star sonics sound like they had three-star sonics, which encouraged me to experiment more.

After playing the HQ Apodizing filter at 22V DC, I tried HQ's Gaussian filter at 22V DC (just to see what it would do), whereupon I noticed an increase in vibrancy but also a dullness. At 24V, the sound got brighter (lighting-wise) and more microdynamic. Rostropovich's *Swan Lake* became bright, tight, and tidy, in an appealing way.

When I upped the voltage to 26V like Roy suggested, the change was more obvious. Swan Lake sounded a half-star better. Vocals became dreamy on *João Gilberto (1973)* (16/44.1 FLAC, Ipanema/Tidal), and that's how I like João to sound. Right away I thought *I like this*, but I knew I needed to listen to more records longer and closer.

You see, it doesn't matter which filter or voltage settings *I* like; what's important for readers to realize is that Tchaikovsky's *Ballet Suites*, which I found to be a two-star recording at 24V apodizing and a three-star recording at 22V apodizing, became a 3.5-star recording at 26V Gaussian. With the Wandla/HYPSOS/Envy driving my Koss ESP 950 electrostatic headphones, it seemed like a five-star recording.

I asked Max Matuszak, Wandla's hardware engineer/designer, why his DAC needed "filter choices." I decided his answer deserved to be shared. "Filter choices are necessary because they change the final sound signature. There are many tradeoffs in digital interpolation-filter design, which have impact on aliasing rejection or pre- and post-ringing of impulse response. Digital filters are designed to focus on one of those characteristics or to balance between them. Therefore, filter selection allows tuning of the Wandla's final sound signature, depending on personal taste. We have some white papers on those topics, which explain this in detail.[4]

"Right now, we use two HQ filters in Wandla. They are versions of filters from HQPlayer app designed and adapted by Jussi Laako of Signalyst for our SERCE module (which processes filtering). Those filters have much better attenuation in the stopband than ESS filters, so they reject aliasing much better."

I asked Max which of the filters he believed best represented the Ferrum sound aesthetic.

"HQ Apod. is our default filter, so it can be considered as the Ferrum sound aesthetic. Trying different supply voltages from HYPSOS will definitely introduce noticeable changes, but I would consider all of them as part of the family of Ferrum's sound aesthetic."

And what about recommended voltages? "When switching from the wall-wart supply, I suggest starting with 24V on the HYPSOS output, because it is the voltage on the output of the wall-wart supply, so it will be a fair comparison. After this, I suggest tinkering with voltage on the HYPSOS output. You should definitely try Roy's suggestions of supply voltage to specific filter, but I encourage you to experiment further after you try those suggestions. Maybe different values will fit your system and taste better. That's why this function of voltage adjustment in HYPSOS is called SST (Sweet Spot Tuning)."

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Digital sources Roon Nucleus+ music server; Denafrips Terminator Plus, HoloAudio Spring 3 DAC.
Preamplifier HoloAudio Serene.
Power amplifiers Parasound Halo A 21+, Elekit TU-8900.
Headphone amplifiers LTA Z10e, Feliks Envy.
Loudspeakers Falcon Acoustics LS3/5a Gold Badge, Heretic AD614, Genelec G Three.
Headphones HiFiMan HE R10P and Susvara, JPS Labs Abyss Diana TC, Meze Elite.
Cables Digital: Manufacturer's own USB (with Wandla), AudioQuest Diamond USB (with Denafrips and HoloAudio DACs). Interconnect: Cardas Clear Beyond, Ikigai Audio Kangai-level. Speaker: Ikigai Audio Kangai-level. AC: AudioQuest Tornado.
Accessories AudioQuest Niagara 1000 power conditioner; Harmonic Resolution Systems M3X-1719-AMG isolation platform, Sound Anchor Reference speaker stands (for Falcons and Genelecs), Fidelis custom stands for Heretics.—**Herb Reichert**

Listening through the Genelec G Three

The analog output of every digital converter must push through all the wires, amps, and speakers strung in front of it. That's not an easy task, and some converters are better equipped to handle it than others. The best someone like me can do is give a DAC a clean, unfettered path.

With hopes of doing that, I connected the balanced analog output of the Wandla to the balanced input of the Genelec G Three active speakers using AudioQuest's ThunderBird interconnects, which I chose because in my view they put through the most low-level signal, especially at the frequency extremes. In my ever-changing sound systems, these interconnects have a history of making R-2R DACs sound bright and superdynamic—qualities they don't normally exhibit. I use ThunderBird wires with the Denafrips Terminator Plus because the T-Birds make the Terminator sound turbocharged. That is exactly what they did for the Wandla.

One thing this interconnect-induced turbocharging accomplished was to make the Ferrum-AudioQuest-Genelec system whisper for goosebumps. Music at low volumes sparkled and scintillated. Playing *João Gilberto (1973)*, the Wandla seduced with detail and captivated with its transparency. João's famously rich vocal textures were seductively highlighted at low volumes. I auditioned the Wandla with a variety of amp-floorspeaker combos, but this Genelec G Three pairing showed the Wandla's sound at its most transparent and dynamic. I earnestly recommend this Wandla–G Three combo as a possible end-game sound system for audiophiles that value measurements *and* sweet sound.

In concert, the $1486/pair G Threes, the $2795 Wandla, and the $1195 HYPSOS power supply were the heart of one of the more articulate and seductive sound systems I've assembled in my studio.

Conclusion

The Wandla-HYPSOS combo is a thoroughly, wisely engineered converter that made me look forward to using it and made me smile every time I did. At its best with the HYPSOS, the Wandla danced in the same ballroom as DACs costing over $10,000. Sincerely recommended. ■

4 See ferrum.audio/digital-filters-in-general, ferrum.audio/wandla-ddf-dynamic-digital-filters, and ferrum.audio/wandla-ddf-dynamic-digital-filtering.

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Jonathan Valin, *THE ABSOLUTE SOUND*, Issue 339

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TOM FINE

Klipsch The Nines

INTEGRATED LOUDSPEAKER SYSTEM

Do you remember your first *really decent* hi-fi system? It opened up your music, teased your brain with the possibilities of thrilling aural excitement, of dives to the bottom of the musical ocean. Perhaps it was all you needed, but more likely it was the beginning of a quest for your own ultimate sound-induced bliss.

That quest may be ongoing and never-ending, because our tastes and preferences evolve over time, money comes and goes, and we're simply never satisfied. And even if we are, eventually, we're audiophiles, and the industry always offers *something* interesting and new, or something old that's new again.

My time with a pair of Klipsch The Nines speaker-gadgets[1] reminded me of the exciting, youthful bloom of my first serious sound system: a Technics SL-D2 turntable with Audio-Technica cartridge, a Philips 45Wpc receiver, and New Advent Loudspeakers. That collection of early-1980s components opened my ears to the endless variety and flavors of recorded music. It stayed with me through college and into early adulthood. I spent thousands of hours with that system, exploring artists and genres, learning music history, forming and refining my own aesthetic.

That system served me well. In middle age, I've had to spend a lot more money and effort to build a system that tickles my sonic bones as intensely as that one did. And then The Nines came along and—well, it's too soon to say what I thought about The Nines, so for now let's just leave it at that.

Voice, heart, and guts

The Nines are part of Klipsch's "Heritage Inspired Power Series," which also includes the Fives and Sevens, similar but smaller speaker-gadget systems. The Nines are the fullest-range and largest speakers in the series. You can buy them directly from Klipsch or from a Klipsch dealer. You can also buy matching 24" stands.

I spent about two months with a pair, in the Walnut finish with off-white fabric grilles, on the matching black metal stands.

1 See footnote 3 in my review of the JBL 4329P speaker-gadgets for the British vs American uses of the word "gadget," at bit.ly/3SvOQoM.

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The Nines is a two-way, bass-reflex speaker system with a rear-ported, 8" "high-excursion fiber-composite cone woofer" and a 1" "LTS vented tweeter with Tractrix horn." The crossover between the two drivers is at 1.6kHz, which equates to about G♯6, nearly four octaves above Middle C. The veneer boxes are a very manageable 19" high, 9.5" wide, and about 13.5" deep, and each weighs less than 30lb. However modest in physical size, they put out quite a bit of well-sorted sound.

The heart of the system, or maybe its nervous system, is built into the back of the Primary speaker unit (on which there is a switch to select its placement as either left or right): electronic module providing input switching, D/A conversion, and class-D amplification. The speakers are connected via a 4-pin, 4m umbilical cable; a 2m extension cable is included in the box. All input connections, and the mono, single-ended RCA subwoofer output, are on the rear of the primary speaker. Wired digital connection—PCM input up to 24/192—is via HDMI-ARC (audio-only HDMI, common on modern flatscreen TVs), S/PDIF optical (TosLink), and USB2 Type B. Wireless connectivity is also provided, via Bluetooth 5.0 and the SBC, AAC, aptX, and aptX-HD audio codecs. There are two analog inputs: one L/R pair on RCA and a 1/8" (3.5mm) stereo miniplug. The RCA inputs are switchable, for a line-level source or a turntable, which connects with the built-in MM phono preamp. (There is also a phono-grounding post.)

Matt Spitznagle, Klipsch's VP for technology and innovation, described the system this way. "We use class-D amplifiers selected for low distortion and excellent noisefloor. Our high-efficiency acoustics demand high performance from the amplifiers. ... In this design, we use a separate DAC that drives analog-input class-D amplifiers. The DAC and amplifier ICs are all from Texas Instruments." He added, "Each driver in the system has its own amplifier channel. All audio processing is performed in DSP. This greatly improves the precision of the crossovers and equalization and therefore the overall consistency of the sound. The DSP is running at a 96kHz sampling rate for additional high-frequency extension.

"All the electronics are located on the rear of the primary speaker. The umbilical cable carries two pairs of conductors: one for the [high-frequency] section and one for the [low-frequency] section of the secondary speaker. We used a proprietary connector type to avoid any chance that the system is miswired and to make the system easier to set up."

A control app, Klipsch Connect, is available for Apple and Google devices. It works via Bluetooth. The app includes a three-band "virtual" equalizer with bass, mid, and treble tone controls, +6/–10 dB each for each band, with presets for "flat," "vocal" (enhanced midrange and reduced bass), "bass," "rock" (with bass and treble increased 3dB and midrange down 1dB), "flat," and "custom" (which means set 'em however you like). There is a "Dynamic Bass" on/off button, which engages a DSP-based loudness curve that varies with volume level. The app allows input switching, and there's a Settings menu. In Settings, you can select one of three "Speaker Placement" options, which engage DSP to reduce the low bass output when the speaker is placed in a corner or against a wall. When a subwoofer is plugged in, a subwoofer-output level control is available. The system also comes with a small plastic remote.

"The goal was for a neutral and accurate sound out of the box with the possibility for the customer to customize the sound to their taste using the app," Chris Perrins, VP of acoustic engineering at Klipsch parent Premium Audio Company, told me.

A gadget for ... what?

Klipsch markets The Nines as equally at home in an audio-only system or as full-range TV speakers.[2] The audio source may be

2 Note how the Nines are staged in the company's marketing photographs: bit.ly/49qJhxJ.

SPECIFICATIONS

Description Two-way bass-reflex, standmount digital loudspeaker system with integrated D/A conversion, class-D amplification, and on-board DSP. Drive units: 1" Titanium LTS vented tweeter with Tractrix silicone-composite horn; 8" high-excursion fiber-composite–cone woofer in a rear-ported enclosure made of MDF and finished in wood veneer. Crossover frequency: 1.6kHz. Frequency response: 34Hz–25kHz, –3dB. Dynamic bass extension: 22Hz at 35% volume. Maximum output: 115dB at 1m (stereo pair). System power: 100W (low frequencies), 20W (high frequencies); 240W total, 480W peak. Dispersion: 90° horizontal, 90° vertical from horn. Digital inputs: HDMI-ARC with CEC, Bluetooth 5.0 (SBC, AAC, aptX, codecs), S/PDIF (TosLink), USB2 Type B. Analog inputs: One pair single-ended on RCA, switchable between phono and line level, one 1/8" (3.5mm) stereo miniplug. Subwoofer outputs on RCA; a 4th-order crossover is engaged when a subwoofer is connected. Formats and sample rates supported: PCM to 24/192.
Dimensions 9.5" (241mm) W × 19.13" (486mm) H × 13.38" (340mm) D. Weight: 28.4lb (12.9kg) primary speaker, 27lb (12.25kg) secondary speaker.
Finishes Walnut with off-white front panel, Black with black front panel.
Serial number of unit reviewed 107128623160250. Made in China.
Price $1499/pair. Optional KS-24 stands: $349/pair. Approximate number of US dealers: 70; also sold online. Warranty: Two years.
Manufacturer
Klipsch, 3502 Woodview Terrace, Suite 200, Indianapolis, IN 46268.
Tel: (317) 860-8100/ (800) 544-1482.
Web: klipsch.com/powered-speakers.

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streaming-centric modern—for instance with a laptop or Roon-connected streaming appliance at its heart, connecting digitally, or a Bluetooth connection from a phone or tablet. (Bluetooth's disadvantages—reduced resolution and lossy transmission—are sometimes trumped by convenience.) But don't forget about those two analog inputs: A hi-fi system built around The Nines can expand into vinyl or receive analog sound from an older TV without a TosLink or HDMI-ARC output. Or a CD player can be connected, via TosLink or one of the analog inputs, or even a radio tuner.

The first thing I did when I got The Nines unpacked, placed on their metal stands, and connected was connect my iPhone by Bluetooth. It was quick and easy. "Klipsch The Nines" showed up as a connection option, and pairing worked without a hitch. I streamed hours of Qobuz playlists including two created by Klipsch.[3]

This was in my small "TV room" space, next to my studio. My purpose was to break in the speakers and to get a general idea of their sound. The speakers can be spread quite far apart in relation to the listening seat without creating a hole in the soundstage. The soundstage they created was also rather tall. The sweet spot was wide, so two people could sit on a sofa, not too far back, and both get large, well-balanced sound.

I immediately noticed the bass, which was ample but not

overhyped. There's not enough to load up a big room, and it can get wooly when music with heavy bass is pushed to high SPLs—that's why there's a subwoofer output—but they provide good low-frequency extension and pack quite a punch. Break-in? Low-frequency detail and extension improved a little bit after several days of music, including my "Burn in METAL HELL" playlist.[4]

Next, I moved The Nines into position as TV speakers, a couple of feet to either side of my "vintage" Sony WEGA, from the last generation of CRT-based televisions. It's old enough to have multiple NTSC analog video inputs and a now-useless off-air tuner. It's new enough to have one HDMI input and a slot for a still-useful CableCARD tuner. This TV doesn't output TosLink or HDMI-ARC, so an analog connection was mandatory. Unfortunately, the TV's RCA outputs delivered very audible hum along with the audio. An old Jensen Iso-Max in-line ground-loop filter solved the problem.

Turns out, The Nines are great TV speakers as long as the audio they are fed is half-decent. It also turns out a lot of streaming TV audio is less than half-decent. For broadcast TV, the audio from Comcast cable's Xfinity app on my Roku box sounds much worse (often

3 See open.qobuz.com/playlist/2543872 and open.qobuz.com/playlist/2543876.

4 See open.qobuz.com/playlist/5676397.

MEASUREMENTS

I performed the measurements with the Klipsch The Nines Primary speaker (serial number 107128623160250). Before I started the testing, I installed the Klipsch Connect app on my iPad mini and paired it with the speaker with Bluetooth. I used the app to set the equalizer controls to Flat, the low-frequency equalization to Other, which is used for a free-space placement away from the room boundaries, and to turn off the Dynamic Bass function, which adjusts the low-frequency extension up or down as the output level changes.

The app identified the speaker's firmware version as "05.00.02" and the DSP firmware as "05.03.04." Apple's USB Prober utility identified the Klipsch as "Klipsch The Nines\000" from "NAE\000," with no serial number string. The USB port operated in the older isochronous mode, and Apple's AudioMIDI utility revealed that The Nines' USB input accepted 16- and 24-bit integer data sampled at all rates from 44.1kHz to 192kHz. The optical S/PDIF input accepted data sampled at rates up to 192kHz.

I used DRA Labs' MLSSA system and a calibrated DPA 4006 microphone to measure the Klipsch's frequency response and dispersion in the farfield, and an Earthworks QTC-40 for the nearfield responses. All the measurements were performed using the line-level analog input and without the grille. This input's impedance was 8.7k ohms. The phono input impedance was close to 12k ohms.

When the speaker is first turned on, its volume is set to –48dB. Klipsch doesn't specify The Nines' sensitivity, just its maximum output, as 115dB at 1m with both speakers operating. With the volume set to +1dB—the app warned that this is "pretty loud" and asked if I was sure I wanted to use this setting—an input signal of 123mV RMS gave a B-weighted spl of 93dB at 1m. This speaker will indeed play "pretty loud."

The speaker enclosure's top panel sounded lively when I rapped it with my knuckles. Examining its vibrational behavior with a plastic-tape accelerometer, I found high-Q resonances at 160Hz, 305Hz, 401Hz, and 617Hz (fig.1). The

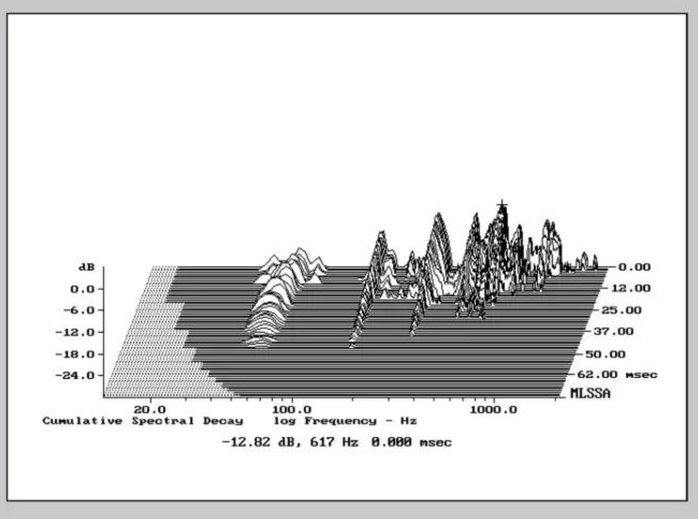

Fig.1 Klipsch The Nines, cumulative spectral-decay plot calculated from output of accelerometer fastened to the center of the top panel (measurement bandwidth, 2kHz).

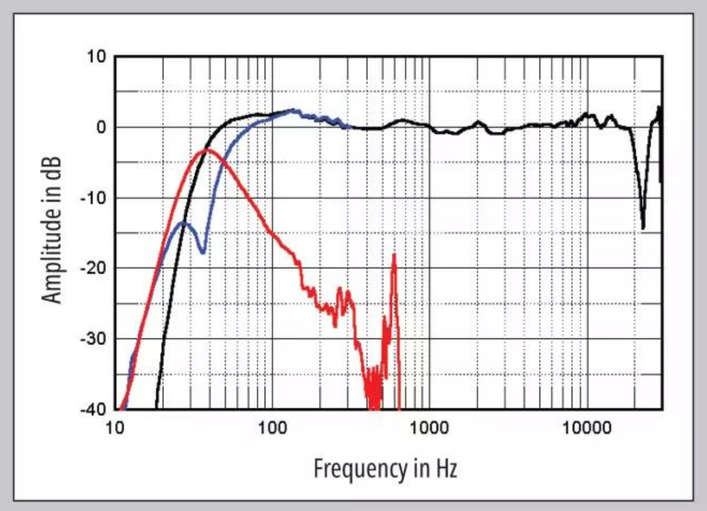

Fig.2 Klipsch The Nines, anechoic response on tweeter axis at 50", averaged across 30° horizontal window and corrected for microphone response, with the nearfield woofer (blue) and port (blue) responses and their complex sum (black), respectively plotted below 300Hz, 630Hz, and 300Hz.

distorted, often highly compressed, often with audible digital artifacts from lossy transmission) than audio from the CableCARD tuner connected directly to the cable system's coaxial 75 ohm line. The audio from the Roku for MAX (formerly HBO Max, now combined with the former Discovery+), Disney+, and Paramount+ apps was good to excellent. That big sweet spot was a big advantage for TV viewing with more than one viewer at a time.

My wife and I enjoyed streaming The Beatles *Get Back* documentary on Disney+. We could easily hear the digital artifacts in some of the dialog recovered by Peter Jackson's "demixing" technology. Most of the music, though, sounded great. We also watched two of my favorite "rock-u-mentaries" on MAX: the Rolling Stones' *Gimme Shelter* and *Monterey Pop*. In both cases, the well-restored stereo sound shined and complemented the excellent picture restorations. I got a kick out of watching NFL football with the big sound, the spectacle enhanced by extra-wide stereo crowd noise and sometimes more on-field trash-talk cussing than the network censors could silence. It was interesting to compare the different sound-mixing approaches taken by each network. (CBS Sports does it best; Amazon Prime does it worst.)

Music ... in HD

It was time to settle in for some serious music listening. I connected my laptop to the USB socket. Windows 10 had no problem sorting out USB2 audio protocols with The Nines, no driver installation required. I streamed Qobuz from the PC app and played files ranging from MP3 to 24/192 from my music library mirror drive, connected to the laptop's USB3 socket.

I decided to test the low-frequency performance of The Nines. It pleased and amused me to learn that John Atkinson uses a Taylor Swift tune, "All Too Well (Taylor's Version)," from her remade *Red* (24/96 FLAC, Big Machine Records/Qobuz), to test low bass. It's a good tune for that purpose, with a prominent bassline dropping an octave at 2:25, when she sings, "'Cause there we are again in the middle of the night." The Nines clearly reproduced the descending low-frequency energy, but pushing the SPLs pushed the fuzziness. These little boxes are great at reasonable volumes, but they simply can't move that much air.

The same was true with "Concrete Jungle," the first cut on the

4 See open.qobuz.com/playlist/5676397.

measurements, continued

sidewalls were better behaved, with the only significant resonant mode present at 246Hz. The high Q (Quality Factor) and the low levels mean that there shouldn't be any midrange coloration as a result of this behavior.

The blue trace in fig.2 shows the woofer's response measured in the nearfield. The minimum-motion notch, which is when the back pressure from the port resonance prevents the cone from moving, lies at 36Hz. The output of the flared port on the rear panel (red trace) peaks between 30Hz and 60Hz. The port's upper-frequency rolloff is initially clean, though there is a low-level resonant mode at 600Hz. As the port fires away from the listener, this mode should not have audible consequences. The black trace below 300Hz in fig.2 shows the sum of the nearfield woofer and port outputs, taking into account acoustic phase and the different distance of each radiator from a nominal farfield microphone position. The rise in response in the upper bass, which is due to the nearfield measurement technique, is not as high as usual, meaning that The Nines' woofer alignment appears to be somewhat overdamped.

The Klipsch's farfield response, averaged across a 30° horizontal window centered on the tweeter axis, is shown as the black trace above 300Hz in fig.2. The balance is impressively even overall, with a very slight rise in output above 7kHz and a sharply defined suckout between 19kHz and 25kHz. Repeating the tweeter-axis measurement with MLSSA's maximum sample rate and the wider-bandwidth Earthworks microphone revealed a smaller suckout above 30kHz and a return to full level at 40kHz. The tweeter's output rolled off above 40kHz, which suggests that the analog inputs are converted to digital with a sample rate of at least 96kHz.

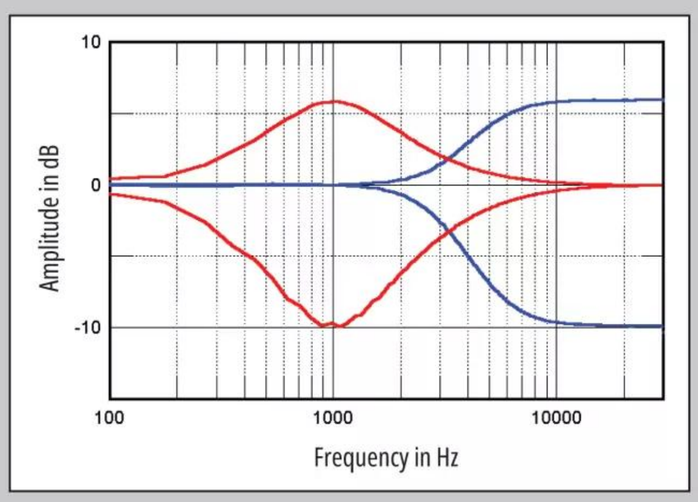

Fig.3 Klipsch The Nines, effect of Mid (red) and Treble (blue) equalizer controls set to +6dB and –10dB (5dB/vertical div.).

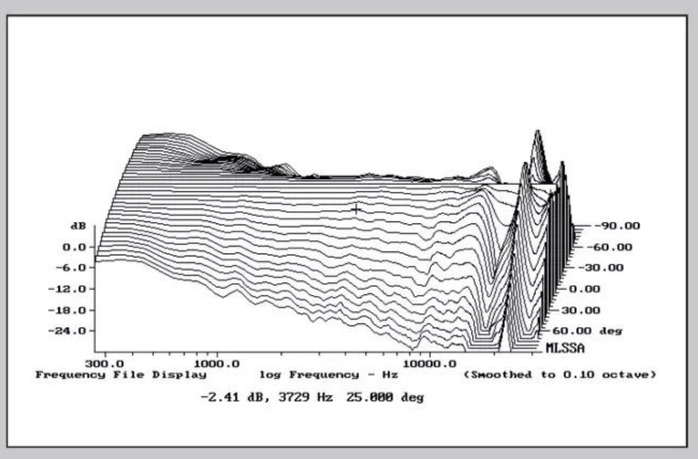

Fig.4 Klipsch The Nines, lateral response family at 50", normalized to response on tweeter axis, from back to front: differences in response 90°–5° off axis, reference response, differences in response 5°–90° off axis.

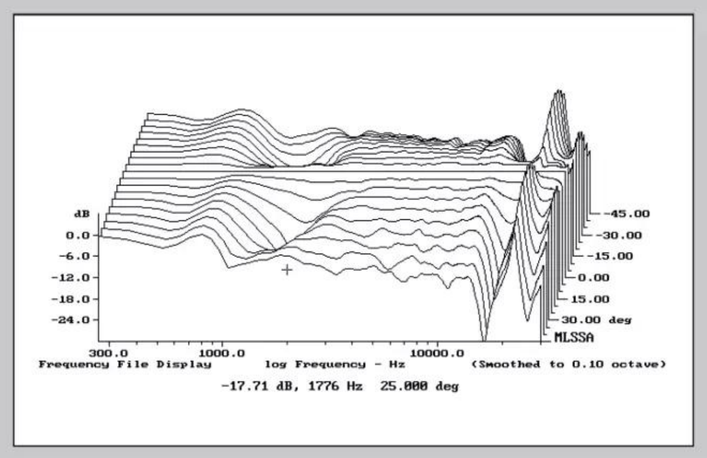

Fig.5 Klipsch The Nines, vertical response family at 50", normalized to response on tweeter axis, from back to front: differences in response 45°–5° above axis, reference response, differences in response 5°–45° below axis.

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50th-anniversary extended reissue of Bob Marley and the Wailers' *Catch a Fire* (24/96 FLAC, Universal Music Catalogue/Qobuz). It's reggae, so the bass is loud. Played at moderate levels, the bass sounded clean and went deep. Played loud, the bass grew some wool. Bass wasn't recorded as cleanly on the second track, "Slave Driver," so it went from somewhat fuzzy to quite fuzzy as I increased the volume. If you listen relatively loud and enjoy music with a heavy bottom, you will probably enjoy The Nines best with a subwoofer connected; Klipsch sells packages with The Nines and various matching subs.

On the plus side, the kickdrum beats were loud and proud no matter the listening volume. The Nines projected the beat well out into the room.

Next, I focused on the soundstage and transmission of low-level details at moderate listening levels. The Nines excelled at this. In the December 2023 Revinylization column, I reviewed three vinyl versions of *Duke Ellington Meets Coleman Hawkins*, one of my favorite jazz albums. On the second track, "Mood Indigo," I wanted to experience the effect of Hawkins stepping out of the right speaker when he begins his solo. With those same three LP versions of the album digitized 24/96 into my music library, I revisited "Mood Indigo" with The Nines. The differences among the three LPs were quite audible; I clearly preferred the original Impulse! LP.

I closed my eyes, forgot I was listening through little wooden boxes (and worked hard to ignore the vinyl ticks and clicks). Lo and behold, there he was in front of me, to my right, blowing that wonderful solo.

But can these speaker-gadgets rock? My acid test for speakers—for determining whether they have any hope of compatibility with my listening tastes—is the Rolling Stones' "Can't You Hear Me Knocking" from *Sticky Fingers*. The version I have preferred lately is on the Japanese SACD, which claims to be a "flat transfer" of the master tape. It preserves the dynamics I remember from the LP—nice, crisp drumbeats and distinct and varied guitars—as opposed to recent CD reissues, which are superloud with almost no dynamic range and so sound mushy. To my surprise, The Nines played the DSD file on my hard drive (ripped from the SACD by a friend who knows

measurements, continued

Fig.3 shows the effect on the tweeter-axis response of the Mid (red traces) and Treble (blue traces) DSP equalizer controls set to their maximum and minimum positions. (The actual response has been subtracted from these traces so that just the differences made by the controls are shown.) The Mid control boosts or attenuates the output at 1kHz by the specified 6dB or 10dB, while the Treble control applies the same boost or cut at 10kHz and above.

The Klipsch The Nines' horizontal radiation pattern, normalized to the tweeter-axis response, is shown in fig.4. The dispersion is superbly well-controlled, with evenly spaced contour lines up to 9kHz, which implies stable stereo imaging. The pattern widens between 9kHz and 16kHz, which might make the top-octave sound a little tipped up in-room. In the vertical plane (fig.5), a suckout develops in the crossover region 10° above and below the tweeter axis, but the balance is preserved over a 10° window centered on that axis.

The Nines' step response (fig.6) indicates that the tweeter's positive-going step arrives first at the microphone, but at 10.25ms rather than the expected 3.75ms, indicating a latency of 6.5ms. The tweeter's output starts to decay just before the start of the woofer's positive-going step. The Klipsch's cumulative spectral-decay plot (fig.7) is superbly clean overall.

Finally, I used my Audio Precision SYS2722 analyzer to examine the behavior of the Klipsch's single-ended subwoofer output (fig.8). Its response peaks between 20Hz and 40Hz, then rolls off above that region, reaching –6dB at 65Hz with then an ultimate 24dB/octave slope. The subwoofer output impedance was a high 5500 ohms at 30Hz; the partnering subwoofer amplifier needs to have an input impedance of at least 10k ohms.

Overall, the Klipsch The Nines offers superb measured performance.

—John Atkinson

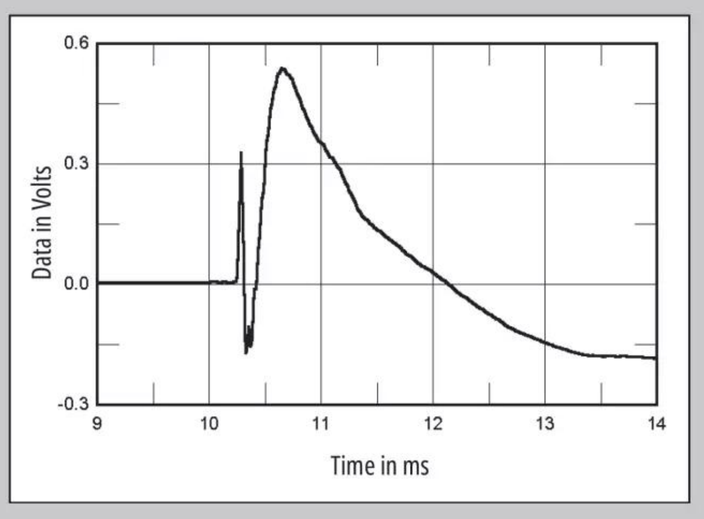

Fig.6 Klipsch The Nines, step response on tweeter axis at 50" (5ms time window, 30kHz bandwidth).

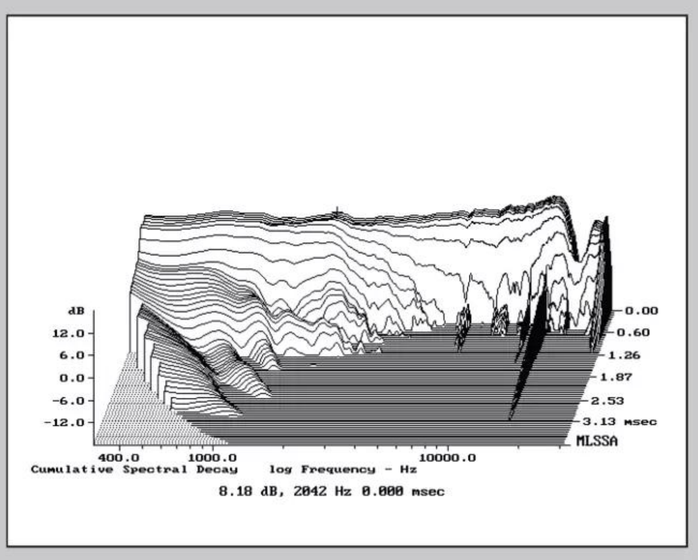

Fig.7 Klipsch The Nines, cumulative spectral-decay plot on tweeter axis at 50" (0.15ms risetime).

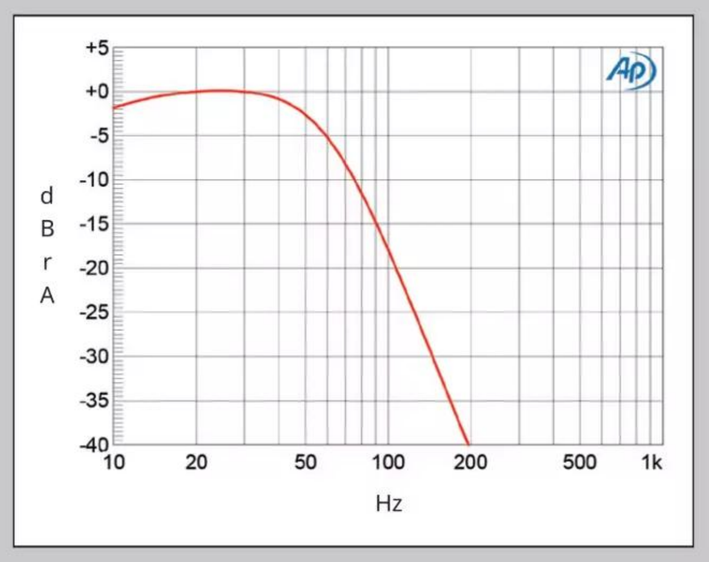

Fig.8 Klipsch The Nines, single-ended subwoofer output response (5dB/vertical div.).

the "PlayStation method") through the Foobar2000 player with the DSD/SACD plug-in.

I sat back, cranked the volume—and wasn't disappointed. Keith Richards's guitar growled out of the right speaker, Mick Taylor's cleaner guitar glistened on the left. Charlie Watts's jazz-infused beat drove the bus. Bill Wyman's subtle, expert bass work was front and center, and the youthful Jagger Swagger was present and accounted for. This is no audiophile-quality test track, but a speaker too veiled or with too light a low end won't give no satisfaction. The Nines jumpin' jack flashed it. I know it's only rock'n'roll, but I like it!

Spinning shiny circles—and black ones

To check the TosLink input, I connected an Oppo DV-970HD DVD/CD/SACD player and spun a pair of shiny silver discs from a pair of box sets I produced and remastered: the complete Antal Doráti/Minneapolis Symphony on Mercury Living Presence, Mono era (31 CDs, Eloquence 484 4064) and Stereo era (30 CDs, Eloquence 484 4207).[5] I dove into the music of Zoltán Kodály (1882–1967), one of Doráti's teachers and mentors.

Along with fellow Hungarian composer Béla Bartók, Kodály prowled the hinterlands of present-day Hungary and Romania collecting peasant songs, work songs, and other folk music. Sometimes they traveled with an Edison cylinder recorder; sometimes they transcribed the music as it flowed.

The final CD of the Doráti mono-era box—a "bonus disc"—was recorded not with the Minneapolis but with the Chicago Symphony. That orchestra had fired conductor Rafael Kubelik but owed Mercury Records more recordings, so Doráti was enlisted for sessions on January 8 and 9, 1954. Among the pieces laid to tape was Kodály's *Peacock Variations*, which is based on a Hungarian folk song he collected. The master tape was problematic, as the AC power in Orchestra Hall was not behaving consistently that day. On all earlier reissues after the original LP,[6] there is audible wow, especially in the high strings and woodwinds. For the remaster, I used Jamie Howarth's miraculous Plangent Process, which straightened out the time-domain problems and brought the music forth undamaged. Aside from the hiss inherent to 1954 magnetic tape, and of course the monophonic perspective, the sound is lifelike, with full orchestral dynamics.

This music tested the ability of The Nines to project extremely quiet and extremely loud sounds into the room. The Nines managed it with moxie.

Next, I played Kodály's *Háry János Suite* from CD3 of the stereo-era box. To remaster this album, I used the CD tracks my mother (Wilma Cozart Fine) created in the 1990s. She got great playback of the 3-track tape from November 17, 1956, recorded in the cavernous Northrop Auditorium in Minneapolis,[7] and made a superb 3-2 mix. The Nines gamely wove the dense fabric of the orchestral score and especially shined during the final movement, "Entrance of the Emperor and His Court."

I switched to phono to test The Nines' phono preamp. My favorite Blue Note jazz record is *Unity* by Larry Young. There's a Kodály connection: Young's piano teacher in Newark, New Jersey, was a student of Kodály. The first cut on *Unity* is titled "Zoltan"; the opening horn flourish by Woody Shaw (trumpet) and Joe Henderson (tenor sax) quotes the Emperor's entrance from *Háry János Suite*.

Connecting a turntable ended up requiring a bit of a "rigamarole," as my father used to say. It's not ideal to place a turntable near a speaker—yet, turntables have short cables, for good reason: The signal level coming out of any cartridge, even a high-output moving magnet, is small; vibrations from a loudspeaker, especially at low frequencies, can cause feedback. Plus, cable capacitance increases with length and affects the sound. But what can you do when the phono preamp is located inside the speaker?

I saw little alternative. I set up a temporary stand made of two milk crates with a piece of thick plywood on top and moved my Technics SL-1200MK5 onto it. The cartridge was an Ortofon 2M Blue that once belonged to the late Art Dudley. I figured this is the right cartridge for this purpose because it's one a person new to vinyl and not (yet) obsessed might own. The 2M Blue's relatively high output gave the system its best shot at achieving decent output with low background noise.

I asked Klipsch's Spitznagle about having to place a turntable so close to a loudspeaker if one didn't want to use overlong signal and grounding wires. Turns out he anticipated the problem. "We inserted moderate subsonic filtering [via DSP] into the system when the phono input is used. Currently, this is a fixed filter," but it can be fine-tuned via a firmware update using the app. "We tried to strike a balance between the low-bass extension of the system and the potential for feedback from a turntable." He's interested in a different kind of feedback, he added—user feedback—so that the engineers can tailor this DSP feature to best suit the widest range of turntable users.

Anyway, feedback wasn't a problem, and at any reasonable listening level, using a moderately high-output cartridge like the 2M Blue, I heard no audible hiss or hum. With the tonearm in its rest, I cranked The Nines to full volume. There was a bit of hiss and noise-hash, maybe Wi-Fi or cellphone RFI leaking into the signal wires, but it would not be audible under any listening conditions within what The Nines are capable of. At any listening volume I consider comfortable, including sitting close to the speakers, the noisefloor was near-silent. Impressive.

If you get serious about playing vinyl and invest in a top-notch cartridge, you'll want to use an external preamp placed close to the turntable, the turntable placed a good distance from the speakers, connected with longer RCA cables, then switch The Nines' input to line-level.

That said, the preamp is fine for casual listening, and it matched up well with the 2M Blue. One thing I like about this cartridge is its relaxed, forgiving character. It doesn't pull every last detail out of the groove, but it pulls out enough to enjoy the music, and it de-emphasizes surface noise and groove whoosh and rumble.

The same is true of The Nines' phono preamp: It's easygoing. It's adequate and more for someone with a lower-cost, no-fuss turn-

table rig and a small collection of vinyl.

On the Blue Note Classic Vinyl reissue of that Larry Young album (Blue Note/UMe 4579754, LP), remastered from the analog tapes by Kevin Gray, the music sounded as expected, though the deep bottom end was missing. There was enough bass to communicate the groups' intentions; the music didn't sound tinny or nasal, but Young's Hammond organ pedal work was less prominent than I'm accustomed to.

Next I spun something goofy-fun: Devo's new-old anthology, *50 Years of De-Evolution, 1973–2023* (2LP, Rhino R1 725327). These recordings, which actually span 1978–2010, were cut to lacquer by Joe Nino-Hernes at Sterling Sound Nashville, from digital masters. The Nines reproduced the peppy, beat-driven music with aplomb. "Jocko Homo," from 1978, sounded suitably lo-fi, and "Beautiful World" from 1981 sounded like it was recorded in a more luxe setting, as indeed it was: NYC's legendary Power Station.

Summing up

Klipsch's The Nines is a flexible, good-sounding speaker-gadget system priced to be accessible to a wide range of users. They make a great TV-sound system, with the built-in ability to stream music from a Bluetooth-connected phone-gadget or tablet. They can also be the heart of a high-quality first step into high fidelity, with connectivity for streaming, CDs, and vinyl, plus the television. As a small-room system, they will fill the space with music either by themselves or in conjunction with a subwoofer. (Klipsch makes several matching models.)

Remember your first hi-fi? I remember mine. The Nines excited me in a similar way, with peppy and fun sound—smaller in scale than I typically experience these days but hitting a lot of high marks: for clarity, detail, and impressive punch and drive. With their array of modern-world connection options, they could be a young person's self-contained gateway into audiophilia, and they make a fine small-room or second system for anyone. Bass-heads can spring for a matching subwoofer. The system is also somewhat portable—not in the sense that you'd haul it to the beach but in the sense that you could take it with you to a vacation home or an Airbnb.

I enjoyed my time with The Nines. I played them hard and had fun. They don't provide the nth degree of detail-revealing audiophile sound, but they grab enough of the music, and push it out in the room, to get the party started and keep it going all night. ■

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Analog sources Technics SL-1200MK5 turntable with KAB modifications (fluid tonearm damping, tonearm rewiring, 78rpm speed added); Ortofon 2M Blue moving magnet cartridge; Sony KD-34XBR960 digital CRT TV/display.

Digital sources Lenovo ThinkPad L530 laptop PC running Windows 10, Qobuz desktop app, and Foobar2000 music player; Oppo DV-970HD DVD/CD/SACD player; iPhone 7S (wireless Bluetooth connection).—**Tom Fine**

5 For more about the Mercury Living Presence series, see Robert Baird's "A Fine Art: The Mercury Living Presence Recordings" at stereophile.com/content/fine-art-mercury-living-presence-recordings. For more about the Doráti sets, see bit.ly/43ZVnuN and bit.ly/434Am0B. Also see the dCS documentary at dcsaudio.com/edit/watch-our-new-film-on-mercury-living-presence.

6 The original recording used Fairchild Pic-Sync, a means to overcome powerline problems. The original LP was cut after a Pic-Sync resolver; subsequent reissues were not—hence the original LP only was relatively free of wow.

7 Northrop has since been gut-renovated and made into a smaller performance space with better acoustics.

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Based in Lubliniec, Poland, Feliks Audio is a boutique, family-owned manufacturer of handcrafted OTL tube headphone amps and a reference 300B SET speaker amp, all famed for their natural tonal balance and handsome aesthetic.

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JASON VICTOR SERINUS

JMF Audio HQS 7001

MONOBLOCK POWER AMPLIFIER

For some, it takes the likes of Scheherazade to seduce; for me, simple sound will suffice. But not just any sound. If I'm going to enter into a relationship with an audio component, I want it to last.

I don't know anyone who, having heard the JMF Audio system at AXPONA 2023—the HQS[1] 6002 dual-mono power amplifier ($40,000) and PRS 1.5 dual-mono line stage preamplifier ($36,000) with Harbeth M40.3 XD speakers—did not rave about the sound. In my show report, I credited the system, assembled by Fidelis Distribution and Audio Skies, with delivering "some of the finest-sounding music" I heard at the show. "This is the perfect sound for mellow music," I proclaimed. "Bliss."

1 HQS is JMF's acronym for "high quality sound."

SPECIFICATIONS

Description Solid state class-AB mono power amplifier, direct-coupled with hand-calibrated, precision balanced input stage. Inputs: 1 balanced (XLR). Outputs: JMF Audio's proprietary gold-plated, 120A-rated, 6mm-diameter LSS terminals (female) and WBT modular gold-plated terminals (male) for spades, wire, and 4mm-diameter banana plugs. Rated output power: 300W into 8 ohms (24.8dBW), 500W into 4 ohms (24dBW), 850W into 2 ohms (23.3dBW). Maximum output current: 112A. Minimum load impedance: 1.5 ohms recommended, tested down to 1 ohm; intentionally limited for amplifier and loudspeaker protection. Input impedance: 20k ohms. Interference rejection: 100dB typical, based on psychoacoustic criteria. Monitoring: Input offset, overload, over temperature, level metering (–15dB–+3dB), deactivatable. Frequency response: 3Hz–20kHz for 250W into 4 ohms, ±0.1dB; –1dB at 100kHz for small signals. THD+N: <0.01% at 250W into 4 ohms, 1kHz; 0.001% typ. unloaded. S/N ratio: 110dB typ., unweighted, 20Hz–20kHz. Damping factor: >1200 wide-band with an 8 ohm load.
Dimensions 19" (482mm) W × 5.9" (149mm) H × 21.2" (539mm) D. Weight: 75lb (34kg).
Finish Rose-gold engraved, silver or black anodized aluminum enclosures in Orose Silver or Black.
Serial numbers of units reviewed 311732, 311733.
Designed and built in France.
Price $77,000/pair. Approximate number of US dealers: 9. Warranty: 5 years parts and labor.
Manufacturer
JMF Audio,
228 Voie des Chartons, 88650 Anould, France.
Web: jmf-audio.com.
North America and UK distributor: Audio Skies,
Los Angeles, CA.
Tel: (310) 975-7099.
Email: info@audioskies.com.
Web: audioskies.com.

Only the need to write umpteen show reports in a short span prevented me from saying more. Completely won over and hoping that JMF Audio's amplifiers would sound as good with my Wilson Audio Alexia V loudspeakers as they did with Harbeth 40.3 XDs, this serial reviewer of mono amps immediately asked Michael Vamos of Audio Skies, the US distributor of JMF Audio, if he (I) could review a pair of JMF monoblocks. The $77,000/pair JMF HQS 7001, which, according to their specifications, output 300W into 8 ohms, 500W into 4 ohms, and 850W into 2 ohms, were the best JMF Audio amps Michael could offer at the time.[2] Given their power and price, they promised a near-ideal comparison with my reference D'Agostino Momentum M400 MxV monoblocks, which cost $79,500/pair and are specified to output 400W into 8 ohms, 800W into 4 ohms, and 1600W into 2 ohms.[3]

Background and technology

JMF Audio's website is among the most informative I've encountered. Its extensive "History" section[4] tells the company's story, explaining that the late Jean-Marie Fusilier (JMF) founded a company in 1974 to produce systems for industrial, defense, and nuclear-plant applications. Jean-Marie designed his first audio product in 1982 and began delivery as JMF Audio in 1985.

JMF Audio's early adopters included René Zingg's Soundville Studios in Lucerne, Switzerland, and Glenn Meadows's Masterfonics Studios in Nashville. Both studios were designed by Tom Hidley. More recently, Morten Lindberg of Grammy-winning label 2L began using JMF Audio's PCD 302 mains filter and power cords to make his recordings. JMF's consumer distribution was limited to Asia until Vamos's Audio Skies introduced JMF Audio electronics to North America at AXPONA 2022.

"Since the beginning, we have used a large power supply, many bipolar output transistors, high voltage for high headroom and precision, bespoke components, and unusual components such as radio-frequency semiconductors," explained Jean-Marie's son, Laurent Fusilier, at the start of a Zoom chat that Vamos also participated in. Laurent now runs the business with his brother, Arnaud.

JMF Audio's website explains in copious detail how the company's technology is implemented in the HQS 7001. Seeking to sort it all out, I asked Fusilier what he considered most important.

"The amplifiers feature a huge reserve of energy, since the large capacitors are charged to high voltages, and that energy depends on the square of the voltage. Our designs are not based on bridged mode. We make symmetrical linear power amplifiers that include a high-current output stage that drives the load. We believe that the reaction of the speakers and their counterforce is usually underestimated. In our opinion, most designers do not consider this. If the power amp cannot adequately drive this load, you don't have a high-fidelity system."

To ensure that the HQS 7001 meets the ambitious specifications the company touts, even with noisy power, a filtered, hard-wired power cable is included. One filter is inside the plug; the other sits at the entrance to the amplifier. "Our experience is that an ordinary IEC connector is too weak for the task," Fusilier said. "When you have connectors inside the amp, outside the amp, and on the cable, current must run through three different connectors. Connectors are always the weakest link. By hard-wiring the power cable, the weak points are eliminated."

Beyond the power cord, the amps are designed to reject noise. "Our balanced interfaces are hand-calibrated for great interference rejection. This results in a common-mode rejection as high as 100dB, while professional interfaces usually show less than 65dB."

Music, Fusilier emphasized, is not steady state. "This is why we give our amplifiers a huge reservoir of energy. The mains are used to charge the [power supply], which contains high-capacity, bespoke capacitors. When there are transients in the music, we don't rely on the mains. Instead, the necessary energy comes from the capacitors, which are located very close to the output; this produces tremendous instantaneous power. After the transient has been delivered, the capacitors are recharged by the mains.

2 JMF Audio's midlevel monoblocks, they sit between the HQS 6002 dual-mono power amplifier and the topline HQS 9001 monoblocks. The HQS 9001 should be available in the US by the time you read this.

3 One notable difference between the JMF Audio HQS 7001 and the D'Agostino M400 MxV is that the JMF includes a proprietary hard-wired power cord that the company recommends be plugged either directly into the wall or via a JMF Audio power line filter. Given the cost of the top-level power cables I use, this increases the price differential. But since different power cables sound different, the D'Agostinos offer more opportunities to tune the sound—for a price.

4 See jmf-audio.com/history.

MEASUREMENTS

I performed a complete set of measurements on one of the JMF HQS 7001s (serial number 311732) with my Audio Precision SYS2722 system,[1] then repeated some of the testing with the magazine's APx500 analyzer. I preconditioned the HQS 7001 by following the CEA's recommendation of running it at one-eighth the specified power into 8 ohms for 30 minutes. At the end of that time, the temperature of the top panel was 101.8°F (38.8°C) and that of the heatsink on the rear panel was much higher, at 173.5°F (78.6.1°C). The JMF amplifier has just enough thermal capacity for its rated power.

The JMF amplifier's balanced input preserved absolute polarity, ie, the XLR jack was wired with pin 2 positive. The HQS 7001's input impedance is specified as 20k ohms. I measured 6.8k ohms from 20Hz to 20kHz. Though this is lower than the specified impedance, modern solid state preamplifiers will have no problems driving the JMF. The voltage gain at 1kHz was higher than usual, at 34.4dB into 8 ohms.

The output impedance, including the series impedance of 6' of spaced-pair cable, was a relatively low 0.15 ohms at 20Hz and 1kHz, rising to 0.23 ohms at 20kHz. As a result, the variation in the frequency response with our standard simulated loudspeaker[2] (fig.1, gray trace) was minimal, at ±0.15dB. The response into resistive loads was flat in the audioband, not reaching –3dB until 180kHz into 8 ohms (blue trace) and 123kHz into 4 ohms (magenta). The rise in output impedance with increasing frequency means that into 2 ohms, the output was down by 3dB at 70kHz. With

1 See stereophile.com/content/measurements-maps-precision.

2 See stereophile.com/content/real-life-measurements-page-2.

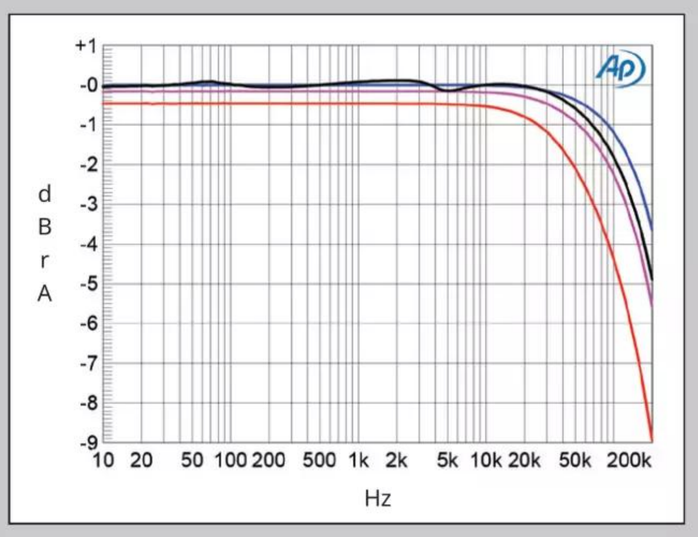

Fig.1 JMF HQS 7001, frequency response at 2.83V into: simulated loudspeaker load (gray), 8 ohms (blue), 4 ohms (magenta), and 2 ohms (red) (1dB/vertical div.).

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Pictured: Lina DAC (top), optional Master Clock (bottom)

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"The signal path is very short, and the slew rate is high. This prevents any masking effect of the large signals on the small signals. When JMF's newly designed amplifiers were tested in Nashville, the engineers were surprised to measure no delay between input and output at 10kHz. We don't rely on a feedback loop for stability; the amplifiers are stable by design. Solid state designs normally require the addition of inductance between the output transistors and the output terminals, for stability. We don't use any. The output stages are directly linked to the output terminal through bolts and large-diameter wires; there is no connector."

Vamos: "From day one, over 40 years ago, JMF Audio has only made reference components. They're not trying to hit a price point. They only focus on making them the best. ... Unlike other companies, they spend all their energy, time, money, and research and development trying to create ultimate amplifiers to serve the music."

Apart from the technical concepts, is there an overarching principle to JMF's design? "My father's dream was universality: to play all kinds of music with fullness and faithfulness for the enjoyment of the music lovers in a broad sense," Laurent Fusilier replied. "To us, our setup was not satisfying in the early 2000s. But now I'm proud to say that my father's goal has been reached: Listeners are drawn into music as an art and forget about the technique.

"We perfect our designs mostly by auditioning classical recordings that are usually made with just a few microphones, so the soundstage is true, and the acoustic is natural. This allows us to evaluate the decay and the dynamics. With most other music, except some acoustic jazz, the soundstage is created artificially in a studio. We have found out that when a design sounds truly honest with classical music and jazz, then it works for everything. We have a partnership with Morten Lindberg's 2L, which enables us to offer a sampler of his recordings with each JMF Audio power amplifier."

JMF Audio's analog printed circuit boards feature proprietary 24K gold plating on both sides. JMF considers gold-plating optimal for natural rendering and better reproduction of nuance, so they apply the same process to connectors. In addition to the output terminals for spades and wires, the amplifiers include proprietary, 6mm-diameter JMF Audio connectors. The company says that by volume, 90% or more of the components and parts in JMF Audio products are manufactured by JMF Audio or made to the company's specifications.

Gold-plating calls for proprietary solder, which is applied by hand and requires higher temperatures. "To avoid damage, after soldering one pin we must wait for the component to cool down before continuing," Fusilier said. "It is a lengthy process."

Designs are modular to ensure maintainability and upgradabil-

measurements, continued

its wide small-signal bandwidth, the JMF's reproduction of a 10kHz squarewave into 8 ohms featured short risetimes in both modes (fig.2), with no overshoot or ringing.

The unweighted, wideband signal/noise ratio (ref. 1W into 8 ohms), taken with the input shorted to ground, was a good 64.6dB. This ratio improved to 80.8dB when the measurement bandwidth was restricted to 22Hz–22kHz, and to 82.7dB when A-weighted. Spectral analysis of the low-frequency noisefloor while the JMF drove a 1kHz tone at 1W into 8 ohms (fig.3) revealed a low level of random noise, but spuriae were present at 60Hz and its odd-order harmonics, each close to –90dB ref. 1W. These will be due to magnetic interference from the power transformer.

JMF specifies the HQS 7001's maximum power as 300W into 8 ohms (24.77dBW), 500W into 4 ohms (24.0dBW), and 850W into 2 ohms (23.27dBW). *Stereophile* defines an amplifier's clipping power as being when the THD+noise reaches 1%. With that criterion, the HQS 7001 slightly exceeded its specified powers into 8 ohms (310W, 24.91dBW, fig.4), and into 4 ohms (515W,

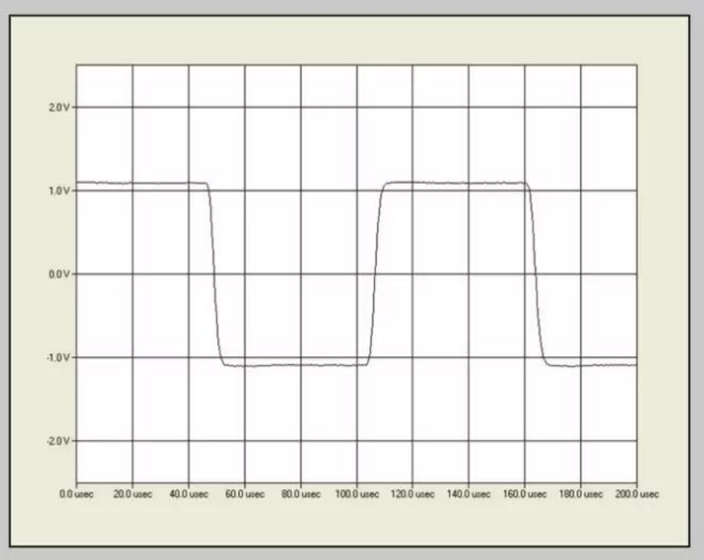

Fig.2 JMF HQS 7001, small-signal 10kHz squarewave into 8 ohms.

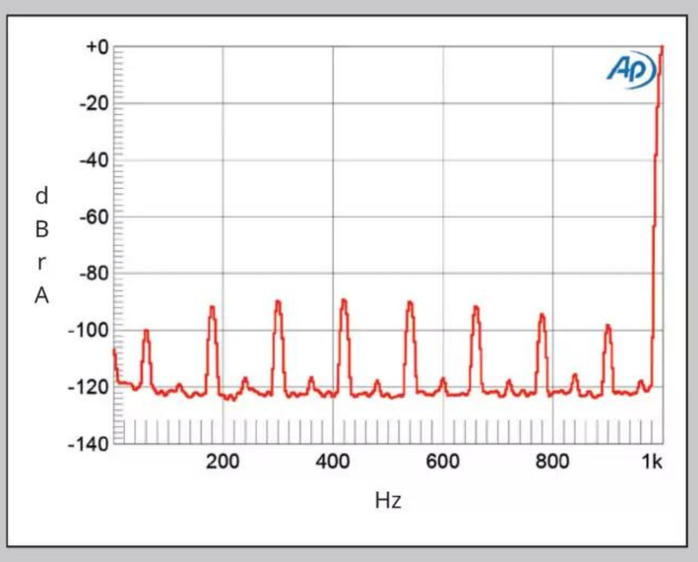

Fig.3 JMF HQS 7001, spectrum of 1kHz sinewave, DC–1kHz, at 1W into 8 ohms (linear frequency scale).

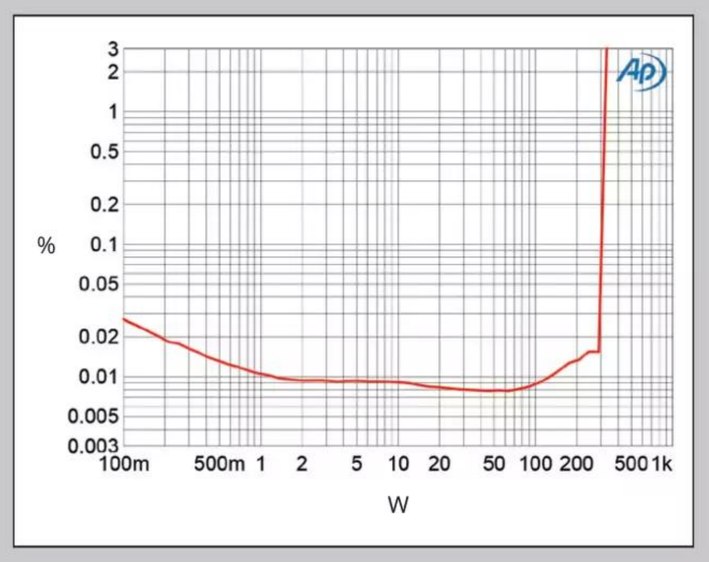

Fig.4 JMF HQS 7001, distortion (%) vs 1kHz continuous output power into 8 ohms.

ity. Class-AB ensures efficiency; class-A is reserved for smaller signals that convey nuance and reverberation. "The transition from pure class-A operation is defined by the load, but pure class-A operation extends up to approximately 10W into 4 ohms," Fusilier said.[5]

What you see/What I did

The visual design of JMF amps is simple. Product identifiers and lettering are engraved on the HQS 7001's front panel, top left and bottom right, and filled with rose gold. The front panel also contains a stainless steel Power button, topped by a small white LED that illumines when the amplifier is on and a small VU-meter toggle, topped by a small red LED that lights when the VU meter is engaged. Above these buttons reside two vertical rows of small LEDs. The three LEDs in the left row indicate protection status and only light up in cases of overload, DC offset, or excessively high heatsink temperatures. (They never lit up while I used the amps, and the heatsinks never felt hot.) The seven LEDs in the right row indicate input signal magnitude, in increments of three decibels: –15dB, –12dB, –9dB, and so on, up to +3dB. 0dB indicates an input voltage necessary for full output voltage. Even while playing Shostakovich and Mahler symphonies at top volume in my 16' × 20' × 9.4' room, the –12dB LEDs lit only briefly. The top five meter LEDs never lit.

The rear panel is dominated by large, vertical heatsink fins. To their left, top-to-bottom, are the XLR input, JMF Audio's proprietary gold-plated, 120A-rated, 6mm-diameter LSS output terminals designed for JMF speaker cables, then WBT modular gold-plated output terminals for spades, wire, or 4mm-diameter banana plugs. JMF Audio recommends their own speaker cables, but to keep things as simple as possible, I used my usual cabling.

Below the outputs sits a ground connection that may be used to link the loudspeaker's shield to the amplifier's case—I didn't need it—and the connection point for the captive power cord. Everything is positioned quite close together, making cable separation a surmountable challenge.

I placed the HQS 7001s on Grand Prix Monza amp stands with the same Wilson Audio Specialties Pedestal supports I usually use with amplifiers. I plugged the amps directly into my dedicated AC line. All other components were powered by a Stromtank S 2500

5 For more information—a lot more—see jmf-audio.com/amphome.

measurements, continued

24.1dBW, fig.5). The HQS 7001 clipped at 760W into 2 ohms (22.8dBW, fig.6), which is lower than the specified maximum power. However, the wall voltage had dropped from 121.4V AC with the amplifier idling to 118.7V AC with it clipping into 2 ohms; this drop was responsible for the shortfall in clipping power.

I examined how the THD+N percentage varied with frequency at 20V, which is equivalent to 50W into 8 ohms, 100W into 4 ohms, and 200W into 2 ohms. The THD+N percentage was low into 8 ohms (fig.7, blue trace) but rose into 4 ohms (magenta trace) and 2 ohms (red trace). The rise in THD+N in the top three audio octaves will be due to the amplifier having relatively limited open-loop gain, which means that less distortion-reducing feedback is available as the frequency rises.[3]

The distortion waveform was predominantly the third harmonic (fig.8), though

3 See fig.3 at stereophile.com/content/future-without-feedback-page-4.

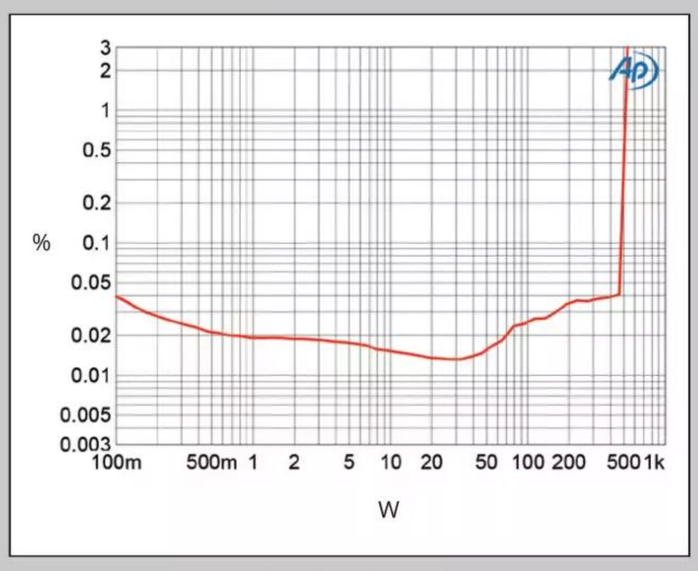

Fig.5 JMF HQS 7001, distortion (%) vs 1kHz continuous output power into 4 ohms.

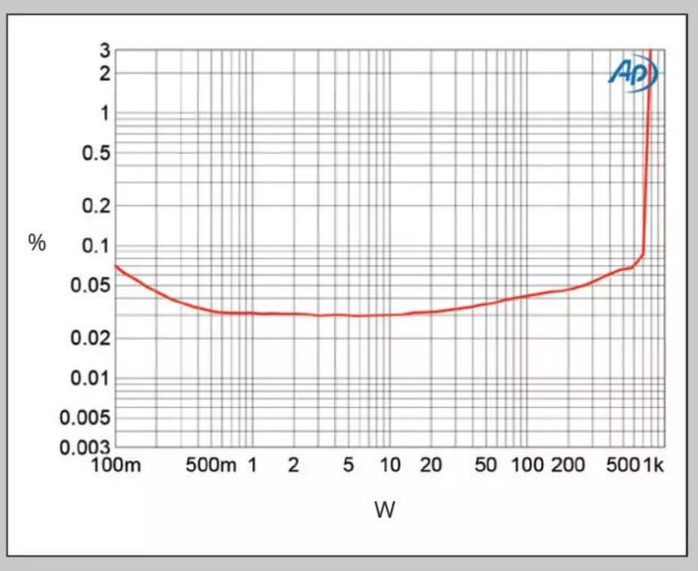

Fig.6 JMF HQS 7001, distortion (%) vs 1kHz continuous output power into 2 ohms.

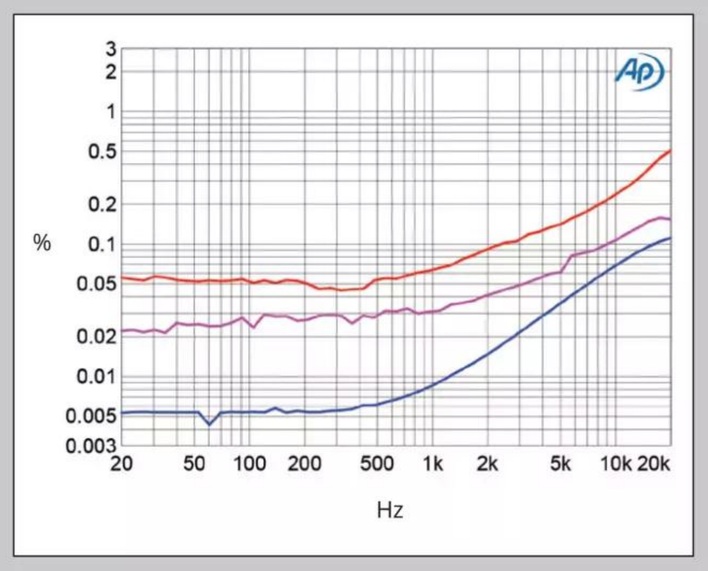

Fig.7 JMF HQS 7001, THD+N (%) vs frequency at 20V into: 8 ohms (blue), 4 ohms (magenta), and 2 ohms (red).

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I took JMF Audio at its word when it recommended allowing its HQS power amplifiers "to warm up for at least four hours at room temperature. For this, the power amplifier should be fully powered on." I left the amps on 24/7.

Time to enjoy

During my first days of listening, I was convinced these amps had a slight sepia finish—that they delivered an entirely satisfying if somewhat toned-down full-range listening experience. Then the sepia finish vanished. In its place, I discovered extremely colorful and neutral sound that made me want to listen more and more. As I type these words on deadline day, I find myself drawn back to the music room for one more listen.

I didn't give the HQS 7001 monos an easy time. Rather than feed them a simple ballad, I challenged them with a recent Recording of the Month that has also become one of my Records to Live For: Shostakovich Symphonies No.2, 3, 12, and 13 performed by the Boston Symphony Orchestra under Andris Nelsons (24/96 WAV, DG 4864965).

Percussion was downright fabulous in the Second Symphony. In the Third and Twelfth, Shostakovich's all-stops assaults of militant optimism were breathtaking. When the Twelfth grew tender and lyrical (albeit not for long), the JMF monos softened with them. And in the monumental Thirteenth, when the magnificent Matthias Goerne gave voice to the rage, sadness, repulsion, irony, stoicism, fear, and resistance transmitted by the five Yevtushenko poems Shostakovich set, the music and sound moved me beyond words.

To pull myself back together, I turned to the infinitely beautiful *Adagietto* from Mahler's Symphony No.5, performed by the Orchestre symphonique de Montréal under Rafael Payare (24/96 FLAC, Pentatone). The sound was gorgeous, warm and filled with color. I enjoyed the presentation's delicacy, grace, and beauty so much that I went on to investigate portions of the symphony's first and final movements. Woodwinds stood out for their warm beauty, and bass was so impressively of a piece that I felt impelled to audition a new percussion recording.

That turned out to be Steven Schick's *Soundlines: Weather Systems II* (24/96 WAV, Islandia Music Records). As fascinating as Xenakis's percussive tour de force, *Psappha*, was, and as realistically and convincingly a huge drum resounded with the HQS 7001—I could feel the visceral hits to the drum's head—I found myself wishing that I could locate the even more awesome 24/352.8 rendition of the piece on 2L's *Utopias* album, which I auditioned over five years ago. That's how vividly aural memory lingers when

measurements, continued

there are crossover distortion spikes visible at the waveform's zero-crossing points. These correlate with the fifth and seventh harmonics in the output spectrum (fig.9), but these are much lower in level than the magnetic interference from the power transformer. With the reduction in corrective feedback at high frequencies, high-order intermodulation products with an equal mix of 19 and 20kHz tones at 50W into 8 ohms were present, though they all lay at or below –72dB (fig.10). Commendably, the second-order difference product at 1kHz also lay below the level of the power supply–related spuriae.

The JMF HQS 7001's measured performance is typical of a high-power, solid state design with a class-AB output stage. Distortion will be lowest into 8 ohms, but the amplifier should not have had any problems driving JVS's Wilson Alexia V speakers to acceptably loud levels.

—John Atkinson

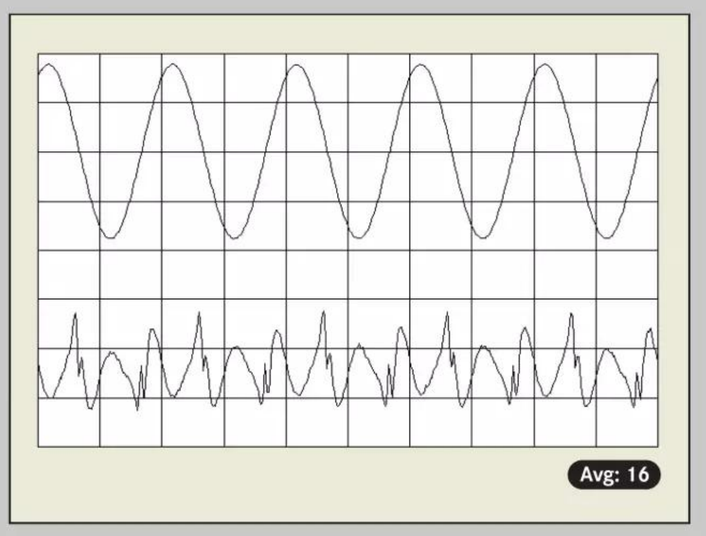

Fig.8 JMF HQS 7001, 1kHz waveform at 50W into 8 ohms, 0.009% THD+N (top); distortion and noise waveform with fundamental notched out (bottom, not to scale).

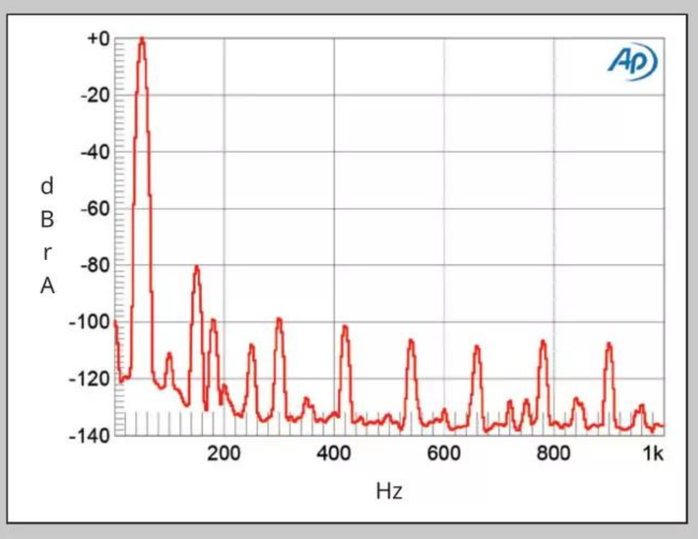

Fig.9 JMF HQS 7001, spectrum of 50Hz sinewave, DC–1kHz, at 50W into 8 ohms (linear frequency scale).

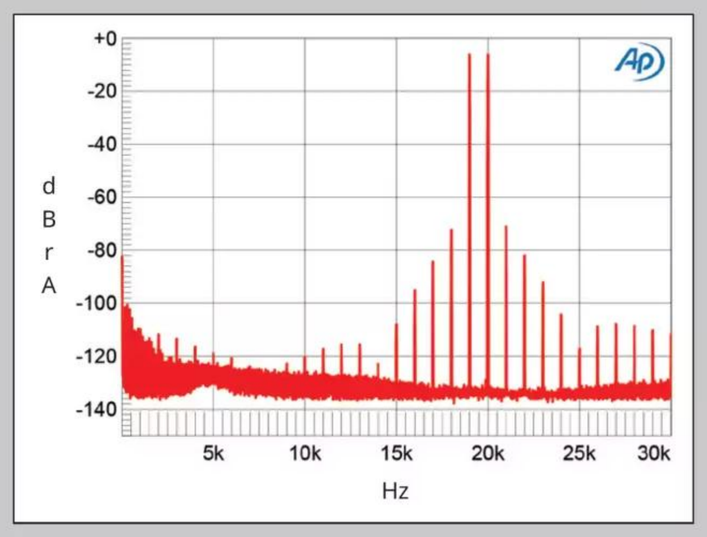

Fig.10 JMF HQS 7001, HF intermodulation spectrum, DC–30kHz, 19+20kHz at 50W peak into 8 ohms (linear frequency scale).

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Sticking with Schick, the unique sounds on his rendition of Vivian Fung's *The Ice Is Talking* intrigued me no end. Sounds of ice cracking and timbral contrasts were totally convincing. Powerful music brought home by powerful amps.

Continuing to heed the call of the untried and unfamiliar, I turned to Lutoslawski's Partita for Violin and Orchestra performed by Christian Tetzlaff and Nicholas Collon on the Finnish Radio Symphony Orchestra's new recording, *Witold Lutoslawski: Concerto for Orchestra, Partita for Violin and Orchestra, Novelette* (24/96 WAV, Ondine ODE 1444-2). Color saturation was superb, and the sound was open and compelling.

I was on a roll. Time for a journey down memory lane, with two of my longtime soprano favorites: Leontyne Price's radiant rendition of Marc-Antoine Charpentier's "Depuis le jour" from the opera, *Louise*, recorded at Price's peak in 1965 on her marvelous recital *Prima Donna Vol. 1* (16/44.1 MQA, RCA Red Seal/Tidal), and Eileen Farrell and Leonard Bernstein's awe-inspiring Immolation Scene from Wagner's *Götterdämmerung*, performed by the New York Philharmonic on what sounds like the biggest soundstage in the whole wide world (24/192 FLAC, Columbia/Qobuz).

For days after—a week—I kept hearing the end of the Immolation Scene in my head. I could hardly believe how well these amps captured the maximal openness and volume of Farrell's voice on high. Every inch of the soundstage was consumed by the collapse of Valhalla, Kingdom of the Gods. As Wagner's curious mix of superhuman powers, soap opera intrigue, and hopeless, fatal romanticism crashed and burned on the operatic stage, another God rose in its place: the God of hi-fi.

Time to investigate some other genres. For this task, I welcomed my friend Scott, who picked two very different tracks, Talk Talk's "Life's What You Make It" from *The Colour of Spring* (24/96 FLAC, Parlophone UK/Qobuz) and The Police's "Spirits in the Material World," from *Ghost in the Machine*, 2003 remaster (16/44.1 FLAC, Polydor/Qobuz). Both sounded vital.

For one of my last few listens, I asked Fusilier to send a few of the tracks JMF Audio uses to evaluate its electronics. One was Morten Lindberg's recording of the title track from his acoustic jazz album, *Polarity* (24/352.8 FLAC, 2L-145), with Jan Gunnar Hoff, the Hoff Ensemble, Audun Kleive, and Anders Jormin. This track sounded open and alive; I finished the album and played it again. As with everything else I played, the music sounded so right that questions of slam, speed, color, vibrancy, and so on never crossed my mind.

Given JMF's French provenance, I ended my formal listening with Susan Graham singing Reynaldo Hahn's "À Chloris," from her reputation-defining recital, *La Belle Époque* (16/44.1 MQA, Erato/Tidal). I was transported back 25 years to the first row of UC Berkeley's Hertz Hall, where I once sat mesmerized by Graham's mezzo as she sang this song. If I am fortunate enough to be surrounded by such beauty as I take my last breath, I will die a lucky man.

Comparison

I tried to compare resolution and detail between my reference D'Agostino Momentum M400 MxV monoblocks and the JMF HQS 7001s during the extremely complex final three minutes of Payare's Mahler Symphony No.5. I found the two presentations equally satisfying—indeed, equally overwhelming. Air and depth seemed more or less equal. At times I felt that the JMFs delivered more bass; other times, I thought the D'Agostino's bass seemed a mite tighter and tidier.

Which is to say

As I contemplate the monoblocks that have moved me most over the past year or so—the Accuphase A-300, Octave Jubilee Mono SE, Infigo Method 3, D'Agostino Momentum M400 MxV, and the JMF Audio HQS 7001 that is the subject of this review—I realize how unique each of them is. Each has a sound as memorable as Aretha's "Respect," Joni Mitchell's two very different recordings of "Both Sides Now," Dylan's definitive "Like a Rolling Stone," or Lotte Lehmann's irrepressible ecstasy on Wagner's "Dich, teure Halle" and "Du bist der Lenz."

The JMF Audio HQS 7001, however, is especially adept at putting music front and center without injecting commentary. It's not Aretha through Accuphase or Dylan through D'Agostino, as memorable and satisfying as those artistic marriages are; it's Joni front and center with only a microphone between you and her soul. The HQS 7001 is a bit like the fine wine whose bouquet you can't describe other than to say that your meal was divine in part because you sipped it.

If you've got the bucks to make a pair of these amplifiers your own, I urge you to check them out. Compare them with your reference and see if they are right for you. I believe that the more you listen, the more you'll want to listen. The JMF Audio HQS 7001s are that good. ■

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

Digital sources dCS Vivaldi Apex DAC, Vivaldi Upsampler Plus, Vivaldi Master Clock, and Rossini Transport; EMM Labs DV2 Integrated DAC, Meitner MA3 Integrated DAC; Innuos Statement Next-Gen Music Server; Small Green Computer Sonore Deluxe opticalModule; Uptone Audio EtherRegen with SOtM sCLK-OCX10 Master Clock and sPS-500 power supply; Nordost QNet switch and QSource linear power supplies (2); HDPlex 300 linear power supply; Synology 5-bay 1019+ NAS with Ferrum Hypsos linear/switching hybrid power supply; Linksys MR9000 mesh router and Arris modem; Apple 2023 iPad Pro and 2017 MacBook Pro laptop with 2.8GHz Intel i7, SSD, 16GB RAM.
Preamplifier Dan D'Agostino Momentum HD.
Power amplifiers Dan D'Agostino Momentum M400 MxV monoblocks.
Loudspeakers Wilson Audio Specialties Alexia V with Lōke subwoofers.
Cables Digital: Nordost Odin 1, Odin 2, and Valhalla 2 (USB and Ethernet), Frey 2 (USB adapter); AudioQuest WEL Signature; Wireworld Platinum Starlight Cat8 (Ethernet), OM1 62.5/125 multimode duplex (fiberoptic). Interconnect (XLR): Nordost Odin 2 and Blue Heaven subwoofer, AudioQuest Dragon, Canare (subwoofers). Speaker: Nordost Odin 2, AudioQuest Dragon. AC: Nordost Odin 2, Valhalla 2, Valhalla 1; AudioQuest Dragon and Firebird. Umbilical cords: Ghent Audio Canare on HDPlex 300 LPS and NAS; QSource Premium DC cables with Lemo terminations for QSources; SOtM sPS-500 umbilical cable for SOtM Master clock.
Accessories Grand Prix Monza 8-shelf double rack and amp stands, 1.5" Formula platform; Symposium Ultra Platform; Nordost 20A QB8 Mark III, 15A QB9 Mark II, QKore 1 and 6; Titanium and Bronze Sort Kones, Sort Lifts; Stromtank S 2500 Quantum MK II power generator; AudioQuest Niagara 7000 and 5000 power conditioners, NRG Edison outlets, JitterBugs; Environmental Potentials EP2050EE surge protector/filter; Wilson Audio Pedestals; A/V RoomService Polyflex Diffusers; Resolution Acoustics room treatment; Stillpoints Clouds (8); HRS DPX-14545 Damping Plates; Marigo Aida CD mat.
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ROGIER VAN BAKEL

Focal Bathys

BLUETOOTH + WIRED HEADPHONES

Bluetooth headphones have brought me joy for years—sometimes a little too much. Once, while waiting for a flight at my regional airport, I switched on the active noise cancellation, closed my eyes, and got so sucked in by Elvis Costello's album *Imperial Bedroom* that I didn't hear the boarding calls. It was no fun texting my client that I'd missed my flight. I fibbed that I'd been stuck in traffic, because blaming Costello for delivering such an immersive triumph would've been uncouth.

Kind of blue

For all their convenience, Bluetooth headphones and earbuds have fundamental problems. Take their batteries (please). They're only fully rechargeable 300–500 times, which means that after just two or three years of moderate-to-heavy use, most people toss their depleted wireless ear-fi in a drawer and buy a new pair.

The regular, non-Bluetooth 'phones I find the most captivating are open-backed planar magnetics like my Audeze LCD-4 and HiFiMAN HE1000se. That means I'm out of luck when I travel, because those cans are big and dorky-looking, and the planar Bluetooth products I'm aware of are all closed-backed. That's understandable—indeed essential—due to the need to block out high levels of background noise, and because in public, your music shouldn't bother others.

More problematic is that the Bluetooth codec is only capable of playing lossy, worse-than–CD-quality files.[1] Not even Bluetooth 5.3, the latest version, supports lossless audio on its own, although chip maker Qualcomm has a Snapdragon microprocessor that allows the playback of hi-rez files within the Bluetooth standard.[2]

Among the first to take advantage of this option was Edifier, the Chinese mid-fi brand, which offers an honest-to-goodness Bluetooth planar headset, the $400 Stax Spirit S3. (Edifier bought Stax in 2012.) The company says that the S3 supports hi-rez music up to 24/96. That ticks an important box for me. But the S3 has no active noise cancellation or customizable EQ. I consider that a shot and a miss. Bluetooth headphones are made for being out and about, including on planes, so ANC isn't optional.

I'd like to be under the sea

With the Bathys, French high-end company Focal took a different approach to bridging the quality gap between Bluetooth cans and wired ones. The $699 Bathys can be enjoyed with or without a cable. Plugged into a music source, the headphone's built-in DAC supports PCM audio up to 24/192.

The name Bathys (team Focal pronounces it Bah-TEECE) comes

1 The compact disc is 42 years old; Bluetooth, almost a quarter-century. That they're still natively incompatible in 2024 shows that technology doesn't necessarily move at the breakneck speed we think it does!

2 To clarify how all this fits together: Bluetooth itself is a technology of wider scope. Audio codecs are part of the Bluetooth package. The default audio codec—supplied with every Bluetooth installation—used to be terrible but is much better in recent Bluetooth versions. This default codec, though, is supplemented by several proprietary codecs, including those from Sony, Apple, and Qualcomm. For an audio codec to be useful, it has to be supported by both the sending and receiving device. Apple devices, to cite an example, support only their own "AAC" Bluetooth—plus the default Bluetooth audio codec.—**Jim Austin**

SPECIFICATIONS

Description Closed-back wireless headphones with active noise cancellation. Connections: Bluetooth 5.1/3.5mm minijack/USB-C. Audio codecs SBC, AAC, aptX, aptX Adaptive. Drivers 1 5/8" (40mm) aluminum-magnesium M-shaped dome. Frequency range 15Hz to 22kHz. Harmonic distortion <0.2% @1kHz. Bluetooth range appr. 50' (open field). Battery life 30 hours in Bluetooth mode; 35 hours in minijack mode, 42 hours in USB DAC mode.
Dimensions Carrying case: 9 7/16" (240mm) × 8 1/4" (210mm) × 2 3/4" (70mm).
Weight 12.3oz (350gm).
Finishes Black, Dune.
Price $699 Approximate number of US dealers: 100. Warranty: Two years.
Serial number of unit reviewed CSCIQA02030362. Drivers designed and manufactured in France. Headphones assembled in China.
Manufacturer Focal-JMlab, 108 Rue de l'Avenir, 42353 La Talaudière cedex, France.
Tel: +1 (33) 04 7743 5700.
Web: focal.com.
US distributor:
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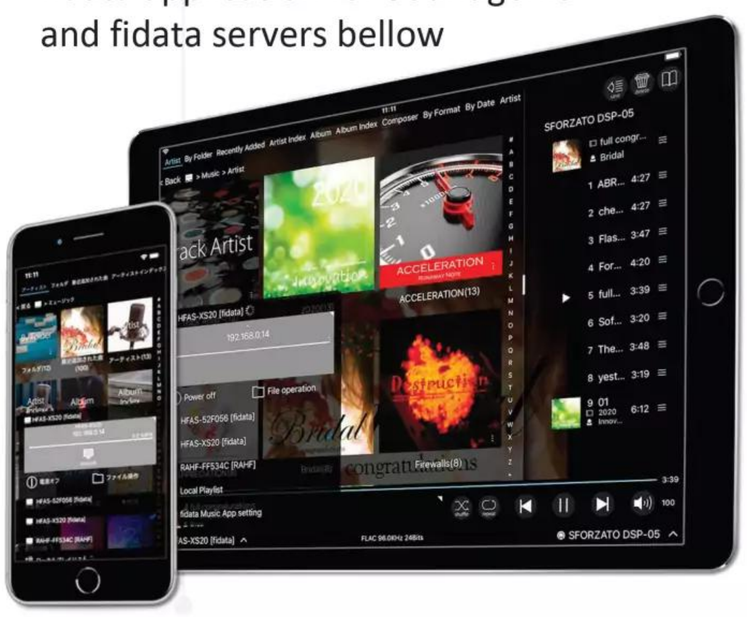

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from bathyscaphe, a 1930s deep-sea submersible, and is intended to conjure the kind of stillness you might find if you journeyed beneath the waves.[3] A trip to the ocean's depths in a hollow steel ball less than 5' in diameter doesn't sound super relaxing to me, but I like the pretty name; and thanks to its onboard ANC, it does provide a sense of ease and calm.

The Bathys's silver-accented design is on the blingy side but keeps things classy. The headphones are slightly bigger and probably draw more attention to themselves than most over-the-ear wireless competitors, such as the $999 Mark Levinson 5909, the $699 Bowers & Wilkins Px8, or the $1600 T+A Solitaire T.

Focal's designers placed the main controls along the rim of the right cup, where your thumb naturally finds them. Near the headband yoke is a springy volume-up-and-down rocker switch, centered by a small multifunction button that you long-press to pair the Bathys to a playback device via Bluetooth. After that, the button is a pause/play toggle when you press it once, and a next- or previous-track button when you hit it two or three times respectively. If a call comes in, a quick press of the same control lets you take it; a longer press sends the caller to voicemail.

Further down the bezel is a three-way power switch. Flicking it from off to on connects you to one of up to eight devices you'd previously linked to the Bathys—whichever one is active and closest. You select the third (middle) position, marked DAC, when you connect the USB-C cable to your portable source. Then there's a small round button that summons Amazon Alexa, Google Assistant, or Apple's Siri—your choice.

Finally, a single switch on the left earcup offers three options, starting with maximum or medium noise cancellation. The third choice is transparency mode, which lets you keep an ear on your environment without turning the music off. That's good if you're having brief conversations in meatspace, and for staying alert to traffic when you're out enjoying your tunes.

In the white room with black curtains

I found the Bathys more comfortable than most headphones I've tried. For my largish head, it has just the right amount of clamping force and earpads that create a tight enough seal for the bass to remain solid and consistent even when walking briskly.

The Bathys's black-on-black plastic buttons don't feel substantial, but they get the job done. The Focal logo on the earcups is backlit, which is cool, but I'd prefer the *power switch* to be lit up. That way, before donning the 'phones, you could tell the right channel from the left in a dimly lit space. As it is, even in decent light, you have to feel along the cups' ridges to locate the (right-hand) side that sports the buttons. Competitors like B&W and Bose print a large R and L on the fabric inside their earcups. I ended up sticking a piece of thin bright masking tape on the Bathys's right yoke—not pretty, but pretty handy.

By the way, in the Focal-Naim smartphone app, you can dim or turn off the backlit logos I mentioned. The dimming function was introduced in a firmware update. Focal is good with this: Even just during the three months I spent with the Bathys, it got better thanks to several over-the-air improvements.

Another example is the Mimi hearing test, which became a Bathys feature last September. Mimi measures the acuity of both ears separately via a series of fading beeps at different frequencies. The moment you can no longer perceive the sound, you release an on-screen button, and so on through the audio spectrum. After about five minutes' worth of testing, Mimi applies a digital profile that aims to correct your hearing deficiencies. Think of it as an automatic EQ, no slider-fiddling needed. (The app also has a separate EQ function though, if that's your preference.)

Neither the idea behind Mimi nor the technology are particularly new. In late 2017, I bought a $175 pair of Bluetooth headphones from a company called Even. The H2s, which Even touted as "glasses for your ears," came with very similar hearing-correction tech built into the right earcup. The resulting "earprint" added a little pop and sparkle. Mimi does too, but better, because it measures a wider range of frequencies. And where the Even fix was either on or off, the Focal app lets you adjust Mimi's proposed correction from one to 100. For me, the 15–20 range yielded the most enjoyable result. At higher settings, cymbals and violins often sounded too sharp, and voices occasionally bore some gauziness, as if they'd been processed with a slight phaser effect.

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen

When people talk of the "Apple tax," they mean the priciness of Apple's products—a negative that for many of us is offset by how well the company's devices usually work, separately and together. Apple, though, has rarely emphasized interoperability with non-Apple devices, and the Bathys is no exception. Focal includes only a minijack cable and a USB-C–to–USB-C cord in the box; to use the built-in DAC, I had to go rummaging through drawers for a USB-C–to-Lightning adapter. The good news: I found two. The bad news: Neither worked.

Even after much online troubleshooting and a few calls with Focal, the cable connection between the headphones and my iPhone 14 Pro Max produced only silence. Ever hopeful, I plugged the Bathys into my wife's and daughters' iPhones, too. Still no dice. It was the same story with my (admittedly aging) iPad Pro. But Focal's headset worked flawlessly when I used the same USB-C cable with my Android phones—an LG V30 and a Samsung Galaxy S10e, both of which I use as music players only, and to test certain apps and devices. My USB-C–equipped MacBook Pro also had no issues with the supplied cord.

I had to be missing something; the Bathys retail box proudly states that the product was "made for iPhone/iPad." After I contacted the kind folks at AudioQuest and told them of my troubles, they sent me their $230 USB-C–to-Lightning Carbon cable. Sweet—but another strikeout.

Fortunately, Focal Naim's ever-diligent head of PR, Wendy Knowles, then came up with the solution. She had Amazon ship me Apple's $29 "Camera Kit" Lightning-to-USB dongle[4] along with a $5 Basesailor-brand USB-C–to–USB-A adapter.[5] To our mutual

3 If I were French, I'd have preferred a name inspired by my homeboy Jules Verne's *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*—such as Nemo, the submarine's captain, or Aronnax, the narrator and scientist. After all, the original bathysphere was developed and manned by a couple of Yanks: William Beebe and Otis Barton. See atlasobscura.com/articles/bathysphere.

4 See apple.com/shop/product/MD821AM/A/lightning-to-usb-camera-adapter.

5 See amazon.com/gp/product/B07N47QRCY—although any properly designed USB-C to USB-A adapter should work; the missing element here was the camera adapter.

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relief, that duo did the trick, and admirably too—as long as I heeded Knowles's advice to "power on the Bathys in DAC mode, connected to the adapter cable, before you plug the whole cable-headphone chain into the iPhone. Otherwise, the phone won't recognize it."

Reached by email at Focal's French headquarters, marketing manager Mégane Montabonel (a name fit for a poem or a sunny song) explained that the Bathys's USB-C cable "is provided for charging and USB audio for all Android, Windows, Mac, Linux, and others." Note that this excludes iOS devices, except that the cable "works with the new iPhone 15 and late-model iPads," which have USB-C inputs. Montabonel ventured that the issue I experienced "is more about Apple's policy regarding Lightning and the authentication required to convert it to USB." She clarified that the promise of the "Made for iPhone" designation specifically "refers to Bluetooth functionality," not the use of the Bathys's internal DAC.

In fact, using the Bathys in DAC mode, Montabonel added, "is a secondary-use case" because "Bluetooth is used most of the time." That's probably true. But the Bathys is marketed as being both wireless (for convenience) and wired (for superior sound). I asked if it might be a good idea for Focal to include the necessary cables for most iOS users in the Bathys box. "Unfortunately, it's very hard to provide all cables and all accessories for all uses," came the reply.

Lesser plaints include the fact that the Bathys's power must always be switched on when you listen, even when you just use the 3.5mm minijack ("due to it being an active amplification input," says Focal). The EQ feature, adjustable in the Focal Naim app, gives the user only five bands (62Hz, 250Hz, 1kHz, 4kHz, and 16kHz). I'd like a lot more granularity, maybe via a parametric EQ instead of a graphic one, something that could perhaps be addressed with a future firmware update. Oh, and in DAC mode, it's not possible to answer calls on your iPhone. Hmpf. (On the plus side, Bluetooth calls were always clear, sans static, in both directions.)

I got the music in me

My sonic preferences—biases?—may work both for and against Focal. It hurt a little when, 18 months ago, I slapped down my credit card to buy my new reference speakers, the glorious Focal Utopia Scala Evos, but I haven't regretted the purchase for a minute. I reviewed the Scalas' bigger brothers, the Maestros, in *Stereophile*'s November 2023 issue, sparing no superlatives. Sopras, Kantas, Choras[6]—I don't think I've heard a Focal speaker I didn't fancy.

But the handful of Focal headphones I've auditioned—I haven't heard the Utopia—never quite hit the spot for me. I found they had too much top-end energy for my tastes—a little bit of a zingy character. So the fact that I liked the Bathys as much as I did came as a bit of a surprise. In Bluetooth mode, even without EQ or Mimi, I found it impactful, punchy, and convincing. Its treble seemed better controlled this time—or at least, better tuned to my liking. I've heard Emmylou Harris's *Wrecking Ball* destroyed by hot treble and excessive sibilance, but the Bathys reproduced the album with poise and sangfroid. No aggressive *sss* sounds or overly wet *ch*s and *t*s.

And when I listened in DAC mode, with the standard cable and the aftermarket adapters, I had to raise a second thumb. The timbre of all kinds of instruments, from cellos to guitars to snare drums, was attractively rendered. Avishai Cohen's[7] moody jazz reinvention of Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata," from *Big Vicious* (24/88.2 FLAC ECM/Qobuz), proved a joy through the Bathys. His horn pierced the soul, not the ears. On this and other tracks, detail retrieval was especially excellent on acoustic instruments and vocals. Male voices sounded natural and not overly chesty (more so after Mimi did her thing), making the Fairfield Four's *Standing in the Safety Zone* (16/44.1 FLAC, Word Records/Qobuz) sound as good as I've heard that album on a sub-$1500 headset.

To test for the reproduction of transients, I played a recent favorite: the Anthony Fiumara composition "Chorale," performed by Dutch percussion group Slagwerk Den Haag (16/44.1 FLAC, Orange Mountain Music/Tidal). The leading edges of each strike had primo immediacy. In other words, transients through the Bathys are extraordinary for 'phones with dynamic drivers, if not as stellar as what I hear from the (admittedly much pricier) planar or electrostatic headphones I generally favor.

ASSOCIATED EQUIPMENT

iPhone 14 Pro Max, LG V30, Samsung Galaxy S10e, iPad Pro (2016), 16" MacBook Pro M1. Apple AirPods Pro 2, Even H2, HiFiMAN HE1000se, Audeze LCD-4. McIntosh MHA-100, Benchmark HPA4, Primaluna EVO400i. Bluesound Node 2i streamer, Musical Fidelity V90 DAC, Auralic Vega DAC.—**Rogier van Bakel**

Closing time

I like the Bathys the way I liked my two huskies, now (dog)gone to the great kennel in the sky. Despite our best precautions, those dogs got out and ran away so often that the local cops knew them by name. They ate anything they could get their mouths on (the dogs I mean, though I have my suspicions about the cops). In short, our furry companions were challenging—and yet, at their badass core, loveable and wonderful.

So it was with the Focal cans. True: connecting the Bathys via Bluetooth was a cinch across all six smartphones I tested. And there should be no problems with the USB-C cable if you want to listen in DAC mode and you have an Android or an iPhone 15. Other iPhone users though? They may have to procure the aforementioned Apple dongle and Basesailor adapter to get it all to work.

Sonically, the Bathys sacrifices little accuracy even over Bluetooth and kicks it up a notch once DAC mode is engaged. It hits the bullseye so confidently that the $700 asking price seems on the modest side.

That said, I often still prefer using the $249 Apple AirPods Pro 2 I reviewed in this magazine a year ago, partly because they use advanced trickery to push the music out of my head, making it seem as if it's coming from in front of me. The AirPods also offer no-fuss integration with other Apple products, which is no small thing if, like me, you've long drunk the Cupertino Kool-Aid (or Apple juice). And the Apple version of ANC, like Sony's, is a step ahead of Focal's in sheer noise-suppressing prowess.

But the white plastic buds are chintzier than the stylish Bathys; and although the ubiquitous pods are very good soundwise, it's the French headset that deserves the *Stereophile* nod based on sonics.

In the future when all's well

If I were a betting man, I'd wager that a new generation of wireless headphones is going to make us reach into our wallets again, and *soon*. Remember the Edifier S3 I mentioned earlier—and the fact that it offers Bluetooth *and* hi-rez audio simultaneously, without cables or adapters? That's the way (uh, huh)I like it! Within a couple of years, either the future Bluetooth 5.4 will be compatible with native lossless streaming, or headphone companies will go the Edifier route and use chips that enable lossless music via the current Bluetooth 5.3 standard. I can hardly wait to see—and hear—what the likes of Apple and Focal will come up with next. ■

6 See stereophile.com/content/focal-and-naim-axpona.

7 The trumpeter, not the bassist of the same name.

FOLLOW-UP

BY JOHN ATKINSON

THIS ISSUE: John Atkinson auditions and measures this Audio Research integrated with its optional DC1 DAC module.

AUDIO RESEARCH I/50 INTEGRATED AMPLIFIER DAC MODULE

I concluded my September 2023 review[1] of this tubed integrated amplifier by writing that the Audio Research I/50 "is the perfect amplifier for use in a relatively small room with a high-quality source and speakers, especially if the latter have a fairly high impedance. The I/50 has a touch of that 'tube magic' but without going whole hog, as so many of the current crop of tubed amplifiers do." The review sample just had balanced and single-ended line inputs and costs $5500, but toward the end of the review period I was sent the optional DC1 DAC module, which adds $1000.[2] As well as coaxial and optical S/PDIF inputs, this module has a USB port and a Bluetooth antenna to allow streaming from computers and smartphones. The module appears to use Asahi Kasei Microdevices' 32-bit, two-channel AKM 4490 DAC chip.

Audio Research's Dave Gordon emailed me a 22-page pdf that offered comprehensive instructions on how to install the DC 1 DAC module. When I started reading the pdf, I was alarmed to read "Installation of the DAC Module should only be attempted by electronic technicians or other qualified service personnel. Audio Research strongly recommends owners DO NOT attempt to install the DAC Module." However, as I have designed and built a number of electronic products over the years, I decided that I did qualify as "service personnel" and set about the installation. I wore a grounding strap on my wrist to make sure I didn't inadvertently zap the module with static electricity.

The module comprises a double-sided printed circuit board stuffed with both surface-mount and through-hole components. One end has a plate with the input ports and antenna connector; the other has two multipin connectors. I placed the I/50 upside down on my test bench—it was stable sitting on its transformer cover—and removed the bottom panel with its fan, carefully unplugging the cable that connects the fan to the amplifier's main circuit board.

Before I started the installation, I noted that the instructions warn that the I/50's high-voltage power supply "may contain hazardous DC charge for several hours after the product has been turned off!" I connected a Fluke DC voltmeter to the test points described in the pdf and found that even though the amplifier had not been used for a couple of weeks, 39.5V was still present. I used the 1k ohm resistor that was included with the module kit to discharge this residual voltage.

Once the voltage had dropped below 1V, I removed the blanking plate on the I/50's rear panel, replaced a grounding cable with a shorter one to make room for the DAC module, and mounted the two nylon standoffs, checking my work as I did so. I then plugged the two multiconductor cables in to the module's connectors and those on the main board and inserted the module as instructed, taking care to dress the two multiconductor cables so that the connections remained secure.

Page 6 of the pdf says, "if the I/50 is used with high-sensitivity loudspeakers," a 2.2µF capacitor that is included with the module "may need to be installed to reduce noise from the DAC module, especially with the Bluetooth input." As the review sample of the I/50 already had this capacitor installed, I was able to skip this step.

Holding my breath, I connected a TosLink cable from my Audio Precision SYS2722 system[3] to the module's optical input and powered up the I/50. After the warmup countdown, I selected that input and fed it data. I slowly turned the volume up and was gratified to see a signal appear at the speaker terminals. I breathed in, powered down the amplifier, then replaced the bottom cover, making sure that the fan cable was correctly dressed as described in the instructions.

Listening

I used my regular KEF LS50 standmounts to audition the Audio Research I/50's DAC module, connecting the speakers to the amplifier's 4 ohm output taps with AudioQuest Robin Hood cable. The source was initially CDs played on an MBL N31 CD player-DAC, using its TosLink output.

Listening to CD data, the tonal balance was a little darker than I was used to with the I/50 handling analog data. However, even without the 3dB boost in the bass I use with Roon and network streamers to extend the small KEFs' low frequencies, the sound of the I/50's digital inputs had sufficient weight on solo piano recordings. Maria João Pires's piano, on her live CD of Brahms's three Op.117 *Intermezzi* (from *The Wigmore Hall Recital*, DG 479 0965), sounded warm, with a satisfying left-hand register. I followed Pires with Robert Silverman performing these delicate piano works on *Stereophile*'s *Intermezzo* CD (STPH003-2), recorded by Kavi Alexander in a Santa Barbara church in 1990. Silverman's Steinway is lighter balanced than Pires's Yamaha but had the same palpable quality as the Wigmore recording with the I/50's DAC module.

The subtle hall acoustic on both these piano recordings was well-resolved, perhaps a little more so than I was used to. I played the CD of the Portland State Chamber Choir's 2020 album *Translations* (Naxos 8.574124), which I had co-engineered. The dome of ambience surrounding the musicians and singers was clearly presented, but again

perhaps slightly more audible than I was expecting with this very familiar recording.

I briefly compared the sound of CD data being decoded by the I/50's DAC module with the MBL N31's analog outputs fed to the Audio Research's balanced inputs, with the levels matched with the 1kHz tone at –20dBFS on my *Editor's Choice* CD (STPH016-2; no longer available). Not a fair comparison perhaps, as the N31 costs $18,500, but the expensive player's analog output with *Molto Molto*, a CD of three works composed by Sasha Matson for jazz orchestra (Stereophile STPH023-2), sounded more transparent than the I/50's TosLink input. While the soundstage was less forward with the MBL, the drums at the end of Matson's Symphony No.3 were reproduced with a little more force.

I must admit, however, that the differences between the MBL and the I/50's DAC module were not nearly as great as I had anticipated. It is possible that the sounds of both digital sources decoding CD data were dominated by the Audio Research amplifier's intrinsic character. Even so, props to the I/50's DAC.

For hi-rez playback, I used Adobe Audition to play files at their native resolution and sample rate on my MacBook Pro, sending USB data to the Audio Research DAC module's USB input, buffered with an AudioQuest Jitterbug FMJ. Again, I played *Molto Molto*, this time the 24/96 files from which I had prepared the CD masters, comparing them with the CD data fed to the I/50's TosLink input. The differences were still smaller than I was expecting, but the lows via hi-rez USB had more weight than they had with optical CD data. Kickdrum had slightly better articulation with 24/96 USB, and the overall presentation had a little more space between the instruments.

I don't have a D/A processor that costs the same $1000 as the Audio Research DAC module, but I do have a $349.95 AudioQuest DragonFly Cobalt. This has a measured resolution very similar to that of the I/50's DAC (see below), though it is limited to sample rates of 96kHz and below. I plugged the DragonFly into the MacBook Pro's other USB port, again via an AudioQuest Jitterbug FMJ, and connected its single-ended analog outputs to one of the I/50's line inputs. (The DragonFly's volume control was set to the maximum to facilitate level matching with the I/50's USB input, and it wouldn't have had any problem driving the I/50's single-ended input impedance of 4.4k ohms.)

Listening again to Matson's Symphony No.3 at 24/96, tonally the two USB sources sounded very similar in the midrange and treble. However, the double bass and kickdrum had more weight with the I/50's digital module, the DragonFly sounding somewhat woolly in comparison. At first, I felt that the soundstage presentations were identical, but after repeated comparisons with a 24/192 needle drop of "Die Tänzerin," from Ulla Meinecke's *Wenn Schon Nicht für Immer Dann Wenigstens für Ewig* (German RCA 426124), I could see/hear more clearly into the reverb-drenched picture presented by the Audio Research's USB input, even after I had set Audition to resample the file to 96kHz so it could be played on the DragonFly.

Measuring

Apple's USB Prober utility identified the I/50 DAC module as "Audio Research HD USB Audio\000\ 000\000\000\000\ 000\000\000\000\000\00" and confirmed that the USB port operated in the optimal

1 See stereophile.com/content/audio-research-i50-integrated-amplifier.

2 The I/50 costs $5500 with line inputs only; the phono module adds $750, the DAC module adds $1000. AR Tube Audio Corporation (Audio Research), 6655 Wedgwood Rd. North, Suite 115, Maple Grove, MN 55311. Tel: (763) 577-9700. Web: audioresearch.com.

3 See stereophile.com/content/measurements-maps-precision.

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asynchronous isochronous mode. Apple's AudioMIDI utility revealed that the I/50 DAC module accepted 16-, 24-, and 32-bit integer data sampled at all rates from 32kHz to 384kHz. The coaxial S/PDIF input accepted data sampled at rates up to 192kHz, while the TosLink input was limited to 44.1kHz and 48kHz.

The digital inputs preserved absolute polarity (ie, were noninverting) from the I/50's loudspeaker and headphone outputs. With a 1kHz signal at –20dBFS and the I/50's volume control set to the maximum of "45," the level at the 8 ohm output tap into 8 ohms was 3.818V, from the 4 ohm output tap into 8 ohms it was 2.652V, and from the headphone output it was 201.3mV. To avoid clipping the power amplifier stage, I performed all the subsequent measurements from the headphone output. (With this in use, the I/50's speaker outputs are muted, though the 6550 output tubes remain powered.)

The I/50's DAC module offers a single reconstruction filter. Fig.1 shows the filter's impulse response with 44.1kHz data. There is considerably more Nyquist-frequency ringing after the single sample at 0dBFS than before, something I have seen before with some other D/A processors.[4] The magenta and red traces in fig.2 show the filter's ultrasonic rolloff with data sampled at 44.1kHz. These traces reach full stopband attenuation just above half the sample rate (this indicated by the vertical green line), with the aliased image at 25kHz of a full-scale tone at 19.1kHz (cyan, blue) suppressed by 48dB. The harmonics associated with the 19.1kHz tone all lie at or below –80dB.

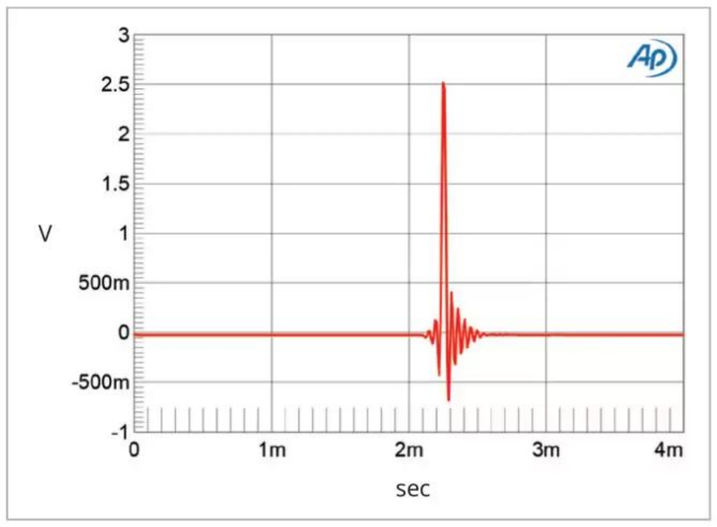

Fig.1 Audio Research I/50 DAC module, impulse response (one sample at 0dBFS, 44.1kHz sampling, 4ms time window).

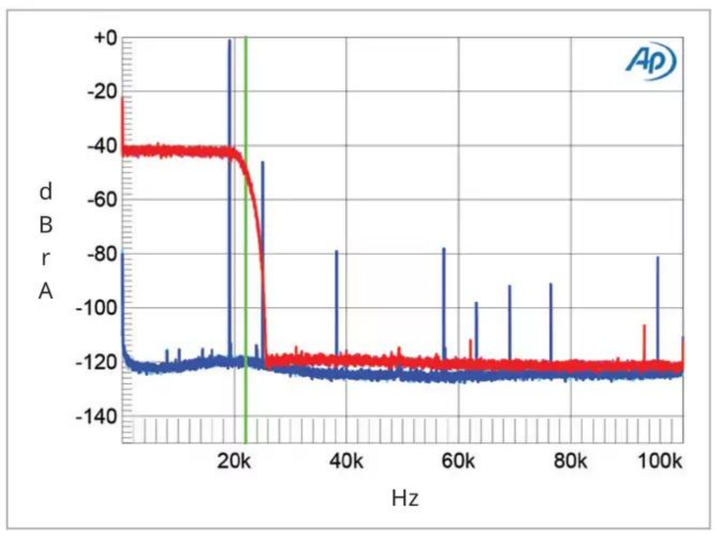

Fig.2 Audio Research I/50 DAC module, wideband spectrum of white noise at –4dBFS (left channel red, right magenta) and 19.1kHz tone at 0dBFS (left blue, right cyan) into 100k ohms with data sampled at 44.1kHz (20dB/vertical div.).

Fig.3 shows the frequency response with data sampled at 44.1, 96, and 192kHz. With the two lower sample rates, there is a gentle rolloff above 10kHz with then a sharp rolloff just below half of each sample rate. The gentle rolloff continues with 192kHz data, the output reaching –3dB at 48kHz and –6dB at 65kHz. There is a bass boost reaching 0.8dB below 50Hz; this was not affected by the level of the volume control. Channel separation was moderate, at >60dB in both directions below 1kHz, falling to 40dB at 20kHz. Though a spurious tone at 60Hz was present in the I/50 DAC module's noisefloor, this lay at only –110dB ref. 1kHz at 0dBFS. The level of random noise was somewhat higher than I was expecting and didn't change when I reduced the volume control setting by 10dB.

Accordingly, an increase in bit depth from 16 to 24, with dithered data representing a 1kHz tone at –90dBFS, dropped the DAC module's noisefloor by around 10dB (fig.4). This implies a resolution close to 18 bits. Odd-order harmonics were present with 24-bit data (blue and red traces), which implies that the least-significant bit was being truncated.

Intermodulation distortion with an equal mix of 19 and 20kHz tones, each at –6dBFS, was very low, with the difference tone at 1kHz lying just above –100dB (0.001%). I examined the I/50 DAC module's rejection of word-clock jitter with high-level 16-bit J-Test data, fed via the USB port and the two S/PDIF inputs. Fig.5 shows the spectrum of the DAC module's output when it was fed TosLink data. (The coaxial and USB inputs behaved identically.) The odd-order harmonics of the undithered low-frequency, LSB-level squarewave lie at the correct levels, though the level of the noisefloor is higher than I usually find. (Because the J-Test signal is undithered, any noise that appears between the odd-order harmonics is due to the product being tested.)

Summing up

The AKM DAC chip can offer excellent measured performance, but in the Audio Research I/50, its ultimate resolution appears to be limited by the amplifier's behavior. However, the module's sound quality with CD data didn't leave me feeling I was missing anything, and it sounded respectably satisfying with hi-rez files. The DAC module adds value to what is already a relatively high-value tubed integrated amplifier. ■

4 See, for example, fig.6 at stereophile.com/content/project-pre-box-s2-digital-da-headphone-amplifier-measurements.

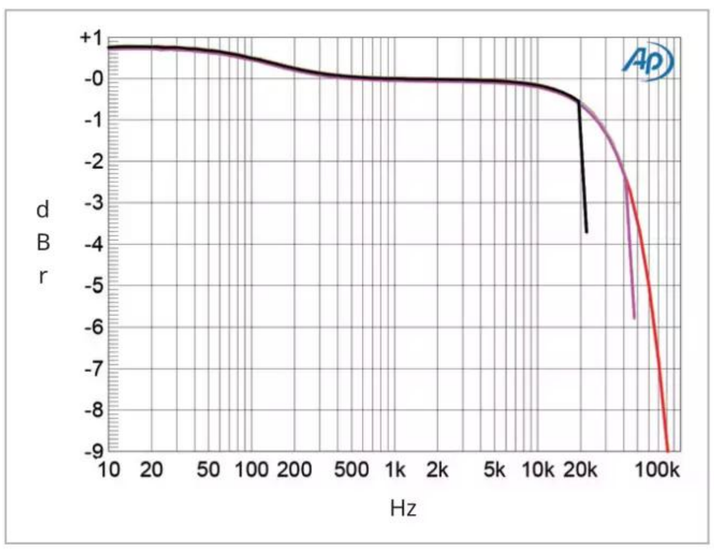

Fig.3 Audio Research I/50 DAC module, frequency response at –12dBFS with data sampled at: 44.1kHz (left channel green, right gray), 96kHz (left cyan, right magenta), and 192kHz (left blue, right red) (1dB/vertical div.).

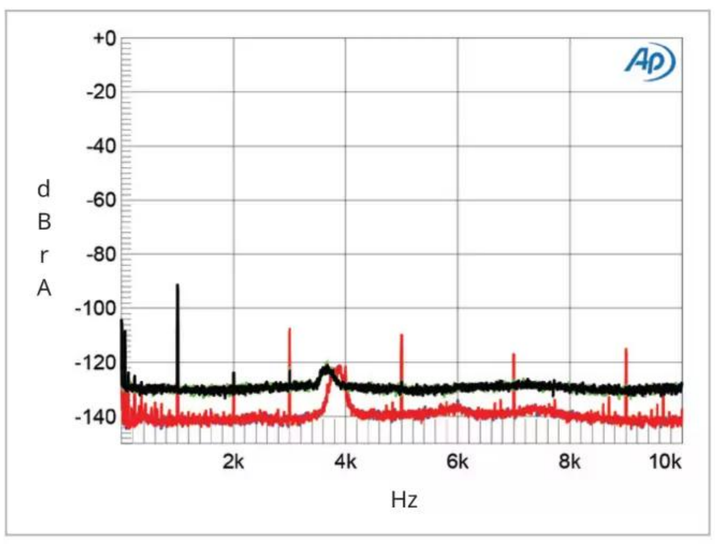

Fig.4 Audio Research I/50 DAC module, spectrum with noise and spuriae of dithered 1kHz tone at –90dBFS with: 16-bit data (left channel green, right gray), 24-bit data (left blue, right red) (20dB/vertical div.).

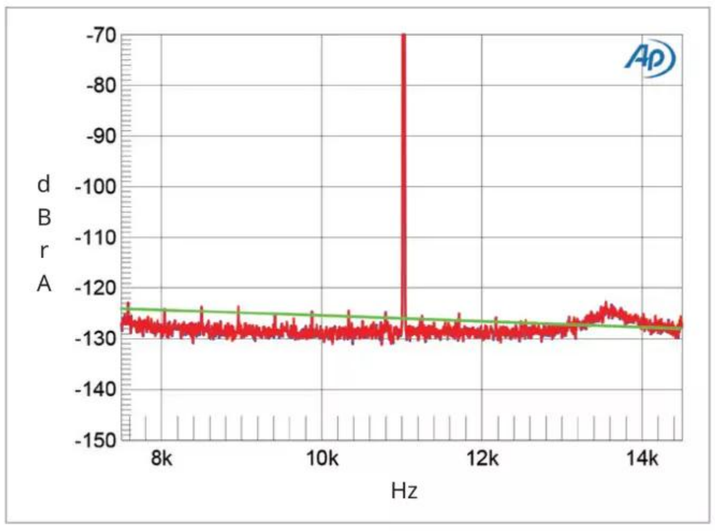

Fig.5 Audio Research I/50 DAC module, high-resolution jitter spectrum of analog output signal, 11.025kHz at –6dBFS, sampled at 44.1kHz with LSB toggled at 229Hz: 16-bit TosLink data (left channel blue, right red). Center frequency of trace, 11.025kHz; frequency range, ±3.5kHz.

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"The EP600.2SE is a perfect example of the value that Class D amplification brings to the audio market. For $1999 with a three-year warranty, it delivers ridiculous levels of horsepower that easily drives traditionally difficult 4 Ohm speaker loads such as Magnepan without stress. Most importantly, across the entire frequency spectrum, the vacuum tubes add a wonderful level of lushness and vibrancy to the music. For those of you who crave power on a smaller budget, get your ears on the EP600.2SE. I'm looking at what excess gear to sell, as this Emerald Physics EP600.2SE has found a home!"

TONEAUDIO SUMMED UP WITH:

"It's really just a great amplifier, and I can't say enough positive things about it. Because of its tremendous value and overall superb performance, I'm unabashedly nominating the Emerald Physics 600.2SE amplifier for a Reviewer's Choice Award. Another win to Underwood Hi-Fi!"

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2024

As I was preparing our annual Records to Die For feature for 2021, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, it occurred to me that at such a moment, "Records to Die For" didn't evoke the same feelings it once did. That name—for what has become *Stereophile*'s most popular feature—had started out light-hearted, derived from a 1980s pop-culture idiom, which eventually found expression in several book and movie titles as well as at least one Death-Metal band. In late 1990, as the 1991 feature was being prepared, it didn't seem so light-hearted at a time of so much death and suffering. At such times, music is a salve, a source of encouragement, perhaps even a means for survival. Records to Die For officially became Records to Live For.

Today—knock on wood—the worst of COVID well behind us, the new designation seems exactly right. This feature is all about music that inspires, that makes life rich—that gives us a reason to live, in times troubled and joyous. These are records that, if you knew you didn't have that much time left, you'd be eager to hear one last time. At least.

Once each year, since 1991, we've asked all our writers, music writers and hi-fi writers, to name two of their favorite albums of all time—albums that have special meaning. The records may be old or new. There is no requirement that they have particular musical or sonic merit, although many of them do. What matters is that they have special meaning—particular emotional resonance—for

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the writer. We used to require that they still be in print or at least reasonably easy to find, but we eliminated that rule a while back: A record to live for (or, before that, a record worth dying for) is worth incurring some expense or putting in some work to track down. Today, the only rule is that each writer must not have chosen the same album for previous versions of this feature; it's fine if it was previously chosen by a different writer.

It is common for Records to Live For to include works by musicians who have recently left us. This year, two of us chose music by Jimmy Buffett, who died last September. Other trends: Two writers chose the very recent collection of Shostakovich symphonies from Andris Nelsons and the Boston Symphony Orchestra, our Recording of the Month for January. Also, two writers chose music hosted at YouTube, reflecting, I'd say, the increasing importance, in the streaming age, of video in hi-fi. Whatever it means, I'm pretty sure this is a first.

Without further ado, here it is: Records to Live For, 2024.—**Jim Austin**

JOHN ATKINSON
HENNING SOMMERRO
BORDERS

Trondheim Symphony Orchestra, Nick Davies; Sigmund Groven, harmonica; Roar Engelberg, pan flute; Marianne Thorsen, violin

2L 2L-173-SABD (Pure Audio Blu-ray & hybrid SACD/MQA CD; available for download as 7.1.4 48k Dolby Atmos TrueHD, 7.1.4 96k Auro-3D, 5.1 24/192 DTS:X, discrete 24/88.2 and DXD 7.1.4 immersive, and 24/192 PCM, 24/352.8 MQA and DXD stereo). 2023. Morten Lindberg, prod., balance, editing, mix, and mastering eng.

As readers of my reviews will be aware, I judge stereo imaging accuracy by listening to how narrow and stable an image placed at the center of the soundstage is produced by a pair of loudspeakers. However, with classical concerto recordings, even if the image of the solo instrument is well-focused and stable, it is too often too large. The recording favors the soloist by placing him or her too far in front of the orchestra with too loud a relative balance. That is not the case with this album from Norwegian label 2L, engineered and produced by Morten Lindberg. Lindberg has been at the forefront of producing immersive recordings—see above for the surround-sound formats in which this album is available—but since surviving the quadraphonic wars in the 1970s, I exclusively enjoy my recorded music in stereo. I therefore listen to *Borders*, which features three 21st century

works for soloist and orchestra, as two-channel 24-bit MQA files. *This* is how it's done—whether it was the harmonica in *Solkverv* (Solstice), the pan pipes in *Vårfest* (Ostara), or the violin on *Grenzer* (Borders), each instrument was the correct size in proportion to the image of the orchestra spread behind it and to its sides and had the appropriate loudness. Two channels, yes, but *musically* immersive.

ANDRÉ PREVIN WITH JOE PASS & RAY BROWN
AFTER HOURS

André Previn (Bösendorfer piano), Ray Brown (double bass), Joe Pass (guitar)

Telarc CD-83302 (CD; 16/44.1 FLAC, Tidal and Qobuz). 1989. Robert Woods, prod.; Jack Renner, eng.; Elaine Martone, ed.

I don't know how I missed this album when it was released in 1989, which has been in heavy rotation since Roon's Radio function served it up last October. My philosophy as a recording engineer was influenced by the late Jack Renner of Telarc, whom I interviewed for *Hi-Fi News* magazine in 1983,[1] and who engineered both this album

and André Previn's performance of Rachmaninoff's Second Symphony, which was one of my 2021 R2D4 choices. I have been a fan of Joe Pass since I saw the guitarist live in concert with Oscar Peterson in the 1970s, and bassist Ray Brown is, of course, masterful at supplying the rhythmic foundation for this drummerless trio. The surprise for me was just how empathetically Previn plays the 11 tracks—10 standards and one original composition. He allows Pass a lot more space than I remember Peterson doing, and his own soloing is a master class in how to respect the composer's intentions while inventively exploring the composition's harmonic and melodic potential.

JIM AUSTIN
JIMMY BUFFETT
A1A

MCA Records MCA-1590 (LP). 1974. Don Gant, prod.; Tommy Semmes, eng.

After traveling from Mobile to Coconut Grove early in his life to hang out with Jerry

Jeff Walker, James William Buffett then wandered farther south, to Key West, where he played for drinks at the Chart Room and made friends with writers Jim Harrison and Thomas McGuane. I, a book-obsessed Alabama transplant growing up in Florida a few years later, trying to carve out an identity for myself, found that biography attractive.

I lost touch years later when his parrothead image overtook his songwriting, with a chain of restaurants and retirement communities including a resort in NYC's Times Square. But I was a fan for a long time, and I've been listening again since his death in 2023. I've been reminded how fine some of his music is.

A1A, named for the coastal highway I spent much time driving on in my younger days, often chemically impaired, was an easy and obvious choice. Sure, I can now see that several of the songs are weak, but any album containing "A Pirate Looks at 40" and "Tin Cup

1 See my tribute to Jack Renner at stereophile.com/content/telarcs-jack-renner-remembered.

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Chalice," with its evocation of that special feeling of salt on skin, earns it a place on any list of life-affirming records, as does the song's refrain:
I wanna go back to the island
Where the shrimp boats tie up to the pilin'
Give me oysters and beer for dinner every day of the year
And I'll feel fine, I'll feel fine.

COCONUT TELEGRAPH

MCA Records MCA5169 (LP). 1980. Norbert Putnam, prod.; Gene Eichelberger, Putnam, engs.

I had decided that both my selections would be Jimmy, but choosing a second Buffett album proved difficult. How could I pass over songs like "Pencil-Thin Mustache," "He Went to Paris," and "Changes in Latitudes, Changes in Attitudes"? Viewing albums as a whole—and noting that these selections are personal and sentimental—I'm going with *Coconut Telegraph*, which contains, in addition to the great title track, "Growing Older but Not Up," "The Weather Is Here, Wish You Were Beautiful," and "Stars Fell on Alabama." And then there's "Island"—that special place again, the place Jimmy aches to return to, but six years after *A1A*, he knows there's no going back:
Island I see you in all of my dreams
Maybe someday I'll have the means to reach your distant shore.
Something tells me, though, that he's there now, sucking live oysters off the shell.

ROBERT BAIRD
KIRSTY MACCOLL
SEE THAT GIRL 1979-2000: A KIRSTY MACCOLL ANTHOLOGY

UMG (8 CDs). 2023. Gavin Povey, Barry Farner, Steve Lillywhite, others, prods.; Alan Douglas, Steve Chase, Chris Duckie, others, engs.

While there have been a number of compilations focused on the varied career of singer-songwriter Kirsty MacColl, none are as complete or well-organized as this 161 track behemoth. With early solo tracks like "They Don't Know," a wealth of live recordings including "There's a Guy Works Down the Chip Shop Swears He's Elvis," from the '92 Glastonbury festival, and tracks from her sidewoman gigs, this is MacColl's memory done right.

THE MOUNTAIN GOATS
JENNY FROM THEBES

MRG841 (LP). 2023. Trina Shoemaker, Isaiah Page, Cade Roberts, prods.; Shoemaker, Page, Roberts, engs.

One of the least recognized creative engines in music today, John Darnielle continues to fashion great albums out of his endless well of songcraft. Bringing back a character from past song stories, Darnielle and his sturdy trio of collaborators have here made their best indie rock album since 2005's *The Sunset Tree*. "Only One Way" is guitar pop to perfection, and the horns on "Cleaning Crew" and "Fresh Tattoo" are a welcome

new flavor. Long may he run.

LARRY BIRNBAUM
JIMMIE LUNCEFORD
LUNCEFORD SPECIAL: 1939–1940

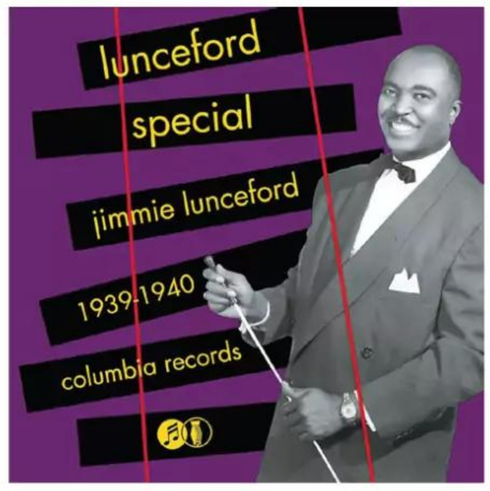
Columbia CK 65647 (CD). 2001. Charles L. Granata, reissue prod.; Andreas Meyer, remastering.

Lunceford led one of the swingingest bands of the big-band era, noted for its skin-tight precision, distinctive two-beat rhythm, and stylistic flexibility, embracing both sweet and hot jazz. This is an outstanding collection from the band's peak period, showcasing its silky ensemble work and such first-rate soloists as trumpeter Snooky Young, trombonist Trummy Young, and saxophonists Willie Smith and Joe Thomas. From the down-home sophistication of "Uptown Blues" to the relentless drive of "White Heat" and the exuberant Sy Oliver rearrangement of the standard "Dinah," the music swings like mad.

CESARIA EVORA
MISS PERFUMADO

Nonesuch 79509-2 (CD). 1992. José da Silva, prod.; Stephane Caisson, eng.

The late Cape Verdean contralto, dubbed the Barefoot Diva, won worldwide acclaim for her deeply felt performances of *mornas* and *coladeiras*, the best-known musical genres of her native islands. Singing in Portuguese Creole, she expresses the melancholy nostalgia that defines "Sodade," the famous *morna*



that serves as the opening track of her breakthrough album. Other memorable songs here include the similarly wistful title track and the cheerfully uptempo *coladeira* "Angola." The

melodies, all by Cape Verdean composers such as Manuel de Novas, Teófilo Chantre, and B. Leza, are consistently attractive. Her soulful voice makes them irresistible.

PHIL BRETT
EN ATTENDANT ANA
PRINCIPIA

Trouble in Mind Records TIM 174 (LP). 2023. Vincent Hivert, Margaux Bouchaudon, prods.; Paul Rannaud, eng.

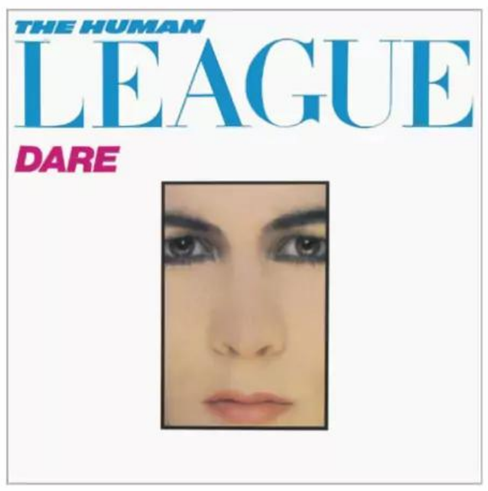
I discovered *Principia*, one of last year's best releases, when I heard it in a record shop I was mooching about in. I was instantly entranced.

The delicate indie-pop reminds me of the early, pre-dance Everything but the Girl. En Attendant Ana are a French band, although luckily for monolinguists such as myself, Margaux Bouchaudon sings mainly in English. Her sweet, entrancing voice, singing songs of loves lost or never found, transports you to the banks of the Seine in the middle of a lovely summer day. Not a bad thing, I'd say.

THE HUMAN LEAGUE
DARE

Virgin 535 100-6 (LP). 1981. Martin Rushent, prod.; Dave Allen, eng.

Shiny pop is often seen as ephemeral—but not *Dare*, which sounds as exciting to me as it did when I first heard it in 1981. Partly that's because the tunes are just so damn catchy. It opens with



three monster singles and closes with two, including "Don't You Want Me." But it's more than sing-alongs: These tracks bookend a darker core of five songs, with themes of assassination, paranoia, and death—not the usual subjects of chart pop. Through it all, Phil Oakey's vocals are cool and stylish but never cold. Altogether, *Dare* is a pop masterpiece.

RAY CHELSTOWSKI

LITTLE STEVEN & THE DISCIPLES OF SOUL
MEN WITHOUT WOMEN

EMI America ST-17086 (LP). 1982. Steven Van Zandt, prod.; Bob Clearmountain, Toby Scott, engs.

In late 1981, Steve Van Zandt had just concluded work on Gary U.S. Bonds's comeback record, *Dedication*. Gary Gersh, who headed the Bonds project at EMI, approached Steve and asked him to consider his own solo debut. Some disgruntled Asbury Jukes had begun doing the same. That led everyone to The Power Station in NYC, where an album named after a Hemingway novel and a persona called "Little Steven" were born.

This is a rock record in every sense. It is intentionally remote, with a brass-filled sound that keeps its distance, in songs that move in and out of darkness. This was Steve Van Zandt declaring independence, with a vulnerability and confidence more downtown NYC than Jersey Shore, sonically more akin to *Exile on Main Street* than *Born to Run*.

While it wasn't a commercial success, it's often referenced as one of the most significant records of the 1980s. When Van Zandt returned with his Disciples a few years ago, this record became the centerpiece of a wildly popular world tour, demonstrating that these songs have improved with age.

TODD RUNDGREN
NEARLY HUMAN

Warner Brothers 1-25881 (LP). 1989. Todd Rundgren, prod.; Michael Rosen, eng.

The Music Box record store, opened in the late '50s

in Newport, Rhode Island, was known as much for closing for shopping sprees by big-name talent like Elton John as it was for having a wide variety of music in stock. In the summer of 1989, I made my first trip to town. I left The Music Box with just two records. One was this gem from Todd.

The single "The Want of a Nail" was getting steady play on NYC FM rock radio; it remains remarkably infectious. This "Todd" was returning from a four-year hiatus with a choral-infused sound reminiscent of that he created with the band Utopia. Even songs about jealousy and loss bounce brightly, with choruses that soar. It's a gorgeous record, made even more human through Todd's decision to *not* play every instrument, as he had on previous records. Bobby Womack, members of The Tubes, and a few dozen others contributed to an atmosphere of majesty and scale. It would be the last Rundgren record to chart and the first he would return to and celebrate during a world tour.

TOM CONRAD

BLOSSOM DEARIE
ONCE UPON A SUMMERTIME

Verve 314 517 223-2 (CD). 1959/1992. Norman Granz, prod.; Tom Nola, eng.; Gary Mayo, remastering

Responsible *Stereophile* contributors probably choose as their R2L4s recordings they regard as masterpieces. Self-indulgent *Stereophile*

writers have been known to proclaim as R2L4s albums that are not masterpieces but that they love anyway. Blossom Dearie was a minor singer with a tiny, waiflike voice. Greater artists than her have interpreted the works of Michel Legrand. Yet when, with surpassing innocence and yearning, Dearie sang lines from Legrand songs like "I remember when the vespers chime/You loved me once upon a summertime," she could melt a heart as hard as the one that beats in the chest of your present self-indulgent correspondent.

GRANT STEWART QUARTET
LIVE AT SMALLS

Stewart, tenor saxophone; Tardo Hammer, piano; David Wong, bass; Phil Stewart, drums

SmallsLIVE SL-0029 (CD). 2012. Spike Wilner, Ben Rubin, prods.; Jimmy Katz, eng.

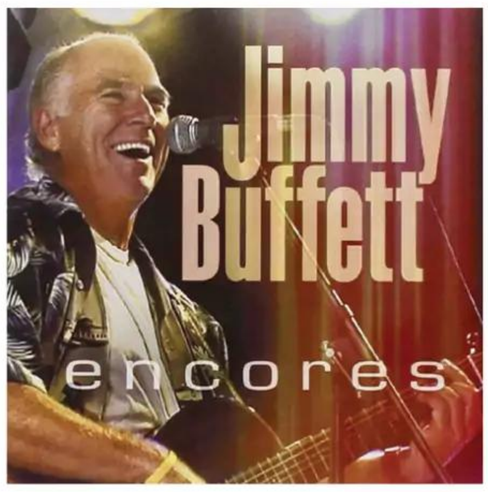
Grant Stewart is a tenor player with a huge, welcoming sound and appealing ideas, but he is not famous, and some jazz hipsters regard him as old-fashioned. Ditto pianist Tardo Hammer. April 6, 2012, was just another night. The audience was probably mostly

New Yorkers and therefore spoiled. They can take a subway to hear people like Stewart and Hammer. But if you don't live in New York, you will appreciate this stunningly well-recorded opportunity to be in the second row for players this beautiful. It was just another night. Which is why it's a Record to Live For.

BRIAN DAMKROGER
JIMMY BUFFETT
ENCORES

Mailboat Records MBD 2120 (Qobuz). 2010. Mac McAnally, prod.; Rich Davis, eng.

Jimmy Buffett is one of those artists "I remember before"—before *Changes in Latitudes*, before *Margaritaville*, before parrotheads and the Fin Dance. I remember the absolute joy he brought to small clubs and grungy



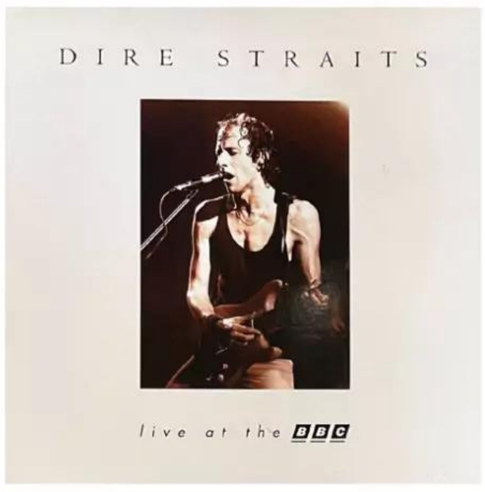
dives and the time he opened for the Eagles at Jeppesen Stadium and stole the show with a stool and his guitar. As happens with too many friends, I didn't realize I missed him until the news of his death sent me searching those memories.

There's plenty to criticize about this collection of encores from concerts in 2008 and 2009, but on the solo numbers, there's a lot more right than wrong. It has claimed a spot near the top of my playlist.

DIRE STRAITS
LIVE AT THE BBC

Windsong International WINLP072 (LP). 1995. Jeff Griffin, Michael Appleton, prods.

Live at the BBC is kind of an asterisk in the Dire Straits discography. It was released in 1995 to fulfill a contractual obligation to Phonogram Records, and it marked the band's final breakup. The recording itself was made in 1978, barely a month after the release of the eponymous first album. In 1995, it was dismissed as a throwaway, a mediocre recording of a then-mediocre band. Looking back from 2023, though, it's lightning in a bottle, an unfiltered, unpackaged, eyes-wide-open look at a great band at a point history would show to be their very best.



TOM FINE
THE BEATLES
RUBBER SOUL

Capitol ST 2442 (LP). 1965. George Martin, prod.

The UK version of this album is a collection of singles padded out with other stuff. The US Capitol version is the first great folk-rock album. It was highly influential on the Beach Boys, among others. The song sequence, made up of tracks from the UK versions of *Help!*

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and *Rubber Soul*, is a real album, with a flow of moods and themes on each side. The songs set the stage for the psychedelic Beatles period that followed. It's no contest. You can make the US album out of tracks ripped from the 1987 or 2009 CDs, and here's a Qobuz playlist: open.qobuz.com/playlist/17604205.

TALKING HEADS
STOP MAKING SENSE (2023 REISSUE)

Sire R1 724897 (2 LP). 1984/2023. Jason Jones, reissue prod.; Joe Nino-Hernes, vinyl mastering.

Jonathan Demme's visually stunning concert movie also has a great soundtrack. The limited-edition 2-LP reissue, which coincided with the dazzlingly restored film's run in IMAX theaters, sold out in weeks. A second pressing is on tap this year. "Big Business / I Zimbra," recorded during the filmed concerts, gets its first release. In conjunction with the movie restoration, the soundtrack was remixed from the first-generation Sony digital multitrack recordings. The result is remarkable clarity and presence. The infectious fun Talking Heads had making the movie comes through in every tune. It sounds fresh and young 30 years later.

KURT GOTTSCHALK
KATE BUSH
THE DREAMING

EMI America ST-17084 (LP). 1983. Kate Bush, prod.; Ron McMaster, eng.

Kate Bush's true masterpiece has lived in the shadows of its successor for four decades, a fate worsened by the resurgence last year of the later album's "Running Up That Hill." The tribal drumming and Fairlight synth were there on *The Dreaming*'s opening and title

tracks, without the believe-in-yourself messaging. Instead, we get a thirst for knowledge and an Australian automobile accident. Elsewhere, there's bank robbers and magicians, not to mention a haunted house in the album's truly terrifying closer. It's manic, chaotic, controlled, and very musical. There's no album quite like it.

DAVID BOWIE
[BLACKSTAR]

Columbia 88875173862, ISO Records 88875173862 (CD). 2016. David Bowie, Tony Visconti, prods.; Erin Tonkon, Kabir Hermon, Kevin Killen, Tony Visconti, engs.

When I heard the news of David Bowie's death, I had already streamed the album he released a few days earlier a half-dozen times. I'm forever glad for the certainty that my take on his swan song isn't tainted by sentiment: I was already convinced of its genius. *Blackstar* is both harrowing

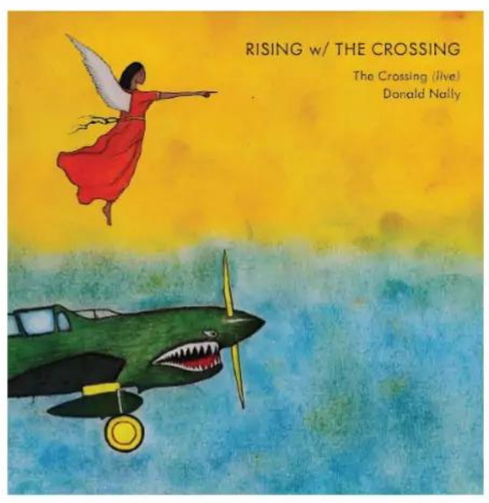
and full of love. I like long songs and monochrome sets, and the darkness of *Blackstar* really only compares to the Thin White Duke of *Station to Station*, my other favorite of his records. Both are bold dramas about moving between worlds.

LARRY GREENHILL
RISING W/THE CROSSING

International Contemporary Ensemble, Kevin Vondrak; The Crossing, Donald Nally; Quicksilver; John Greca, keyboards; Edward Babcock, marimba

New Focus Recordings FCR281 (CD). 2020. Paul Vazquez, Donald Nally, Kevin Vondrak, prods.; Vazquez, eng.

The Crossing is a Philadelphia-based choral group, and *The Rising* refers to their effort to fill the void during the pandemic's Great Shutdown, when they were unable to perform. Donald Nally, the group's director, sent a digital music file from their archive of live recordings to friends and fellow musicians every sunrise (in Philadelphia) for two weeks, which explains the album's title. The standout track for me is Eriks Ešenvalds's



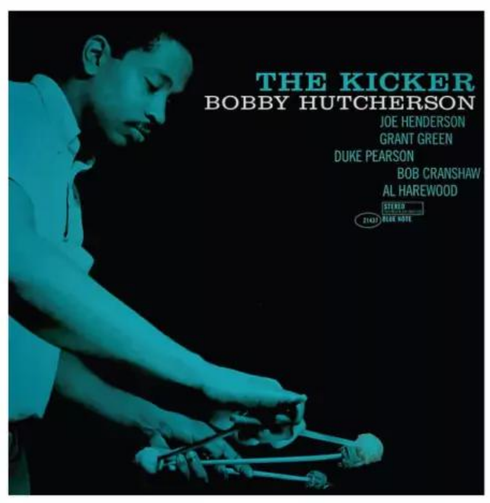
"Earth Teach Me Quiet," with words from a Ute prayer. The Crossing delivers Esenvalds's layered vocals suffused with reverence, calm, and a haunting quality that fills me with sadness. David Lang's "National Anthems: I. Our Land With Peace" wrapped me in intimate vocals, not the usual national-anthem bombast. "Protect yourself from infection" opens the album; it's a sardonic piece that blends Lang's solemn, religious music with words from a 1918 government document undercut by soloists reading the names of Philadelphians who died from influenza despite the advice. The effect makes the album inspiring, uplifting, and very special.

BOBBY HUTCHERSON
THE KICKER

Joe Henderson, tenor saxophone; Bobby Hutcherson, vibes; Grant Green, guitar; Duke Pearson, piano; Bob Cranshaw, bass; Al Harewood, drums

Blue Note ST-21437 (LP). 1963/2013. Alfred Lion, Joe Harley, prods.; Rudy van Gelder, Kevin Gray, engs.

I bought this 180gm Blue Note reissue of the 1966 recording after reading Fred Kaplan's review in *Stereophile*. Like Kaplan, I loved the airy and dynamic sound of the new vinyl version and how I was swept up by the group's unified playing. I was blown away by Bobby Hutcherson's vibes, which are quick, clearly defined, and recorded without excessive reverb. Hutcherson's vibes on "Mirrors" reminded me of Milt Jackson's with the MJQ, followed by Henderson's



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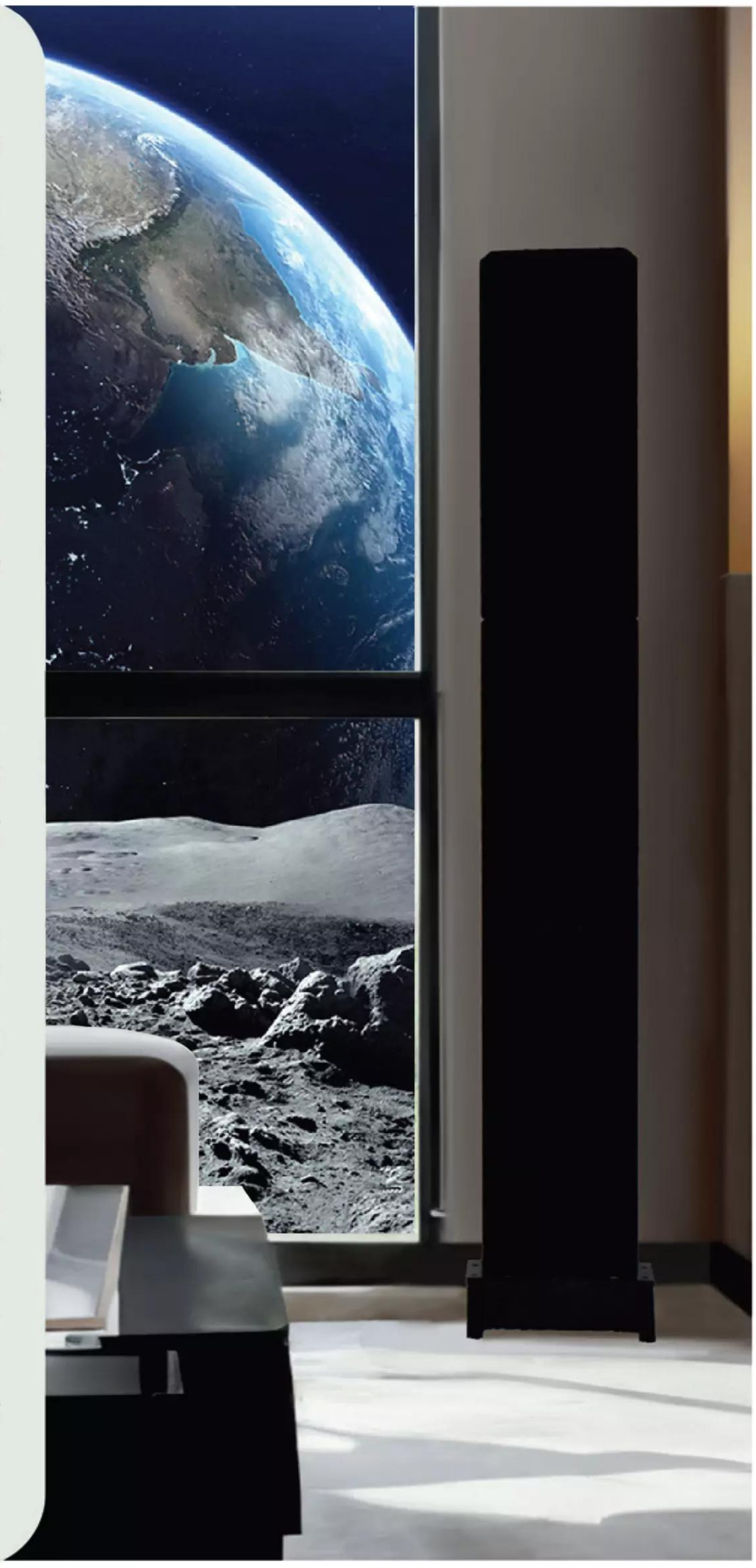

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breath-taking tenor sax. On the disc's other side, on "Bedouin," Hutcherson's improvisational virtuosity keeps up with the upbeat, driving tempo. This is inspired jamming.

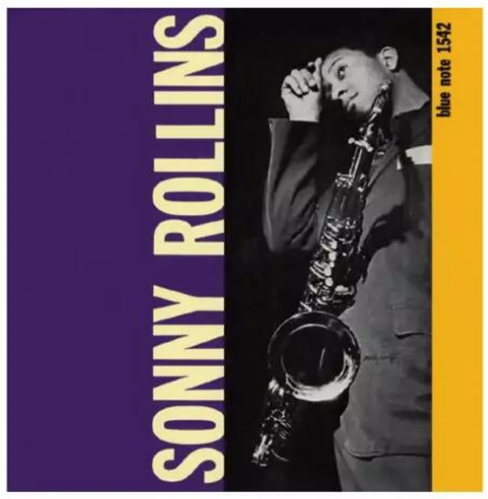
ALEX HALBERSTADT

SONNY ROLLINS

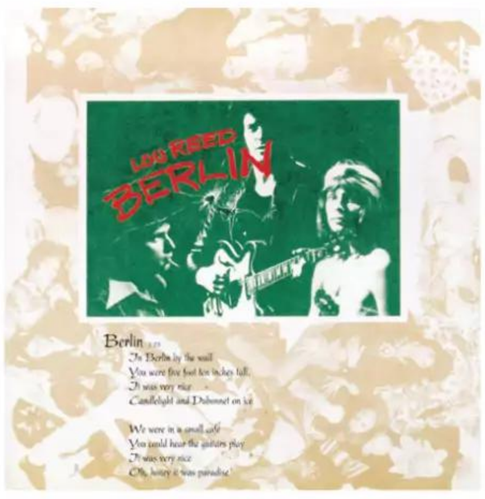
SONNY ROLLINS (SOMETIMES KNOWN AS SONNY ROLLINS VOL. 1)

Blue Note BLP-1542 (LP). 1957. Alfred Lion, prod.; Rudy Van Gelder, eng.

In the 1950s, Sonny Rollins made a string of records that showcased his relentlessly original improvisation in solos that seemed incapable of sounding obvious for even a measure. Among these LPs were a handful of masterpieces. This eponymous session for Blue Note isn't one of them. It happens,



however, to be a perfect record. Rollins made greater artistic statements but never a greater stylistic one. What *Volume 1* demonstrates better than the others is the density of tone he could bring out of the saxophone as well as the hard-boiled economy of his phrasing, which finds its truest analogs in the laconic prose of writers like William Maxwell and James M. Cain. Rollins's playing here has no false or extra notes, no showy runs, no vulgarity. As Cain



wrote in *The Postman Only Rings Twice*, "the devil got his money's worth that night."

LOU REED

BERLIN

RCA Victor APL1-0207 (LP). 1973. Bob Ezrin, prod.; Peter Flanagan, Robin Black, Randy Kling, others, engs.

There's an uneasy ambiguity in much of Lou Reed's solo work that may be its defining feature. The music teeters between banality and flashes of genius. The lyrics embody a perverse interest in transgression as well as visceral anguish. This is no place for listeners looking for consistency and polish. *Berlin* is the record that captures these extremes most acutely. An orchestral rock cabaret, it follows a doomed couple named Caroline and Jim through episodes of spousal battery, addiction, prostitution, child abuse, and suicide so ghoulish that the whole thing skates on the edge of parody. Yet these episodes are shot through with vivid writing, tar-black humor, and glimpses of ravishing beauty. The musical settings encompass everything from arena rock and prog soundscapes to musique concrète. One of those albums that evolve in the mind with each subsequent listen, *Berlin* never gets easier. Reed may have been

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on to something when he said, "Maybe listening to my music is not the best idea if you live a very constricted life."

ANDREY HENKIN
IRON MAIDEN
SEVENTH SON OF A SEVENTH SON

Capitol C4-90258 (cassette). 1988. Martin Birch, prod., eng.

All of the phenomenal songcraft and long-form narrative found in earlier individual songs—"To Tame a Land," "Rime of the Ancient Mariner," and "Alexander the Great"—on Iron Maiden's previous three releases come together in its sole foray into the concept-album genre. Loosely inspired by Orson Scott Card's 1987 fantasy novel *Seventh Son*, this was the band's first nonlive

recording that conveyed the epicness of an Iron Maiden concert. The title track is one of the finest compositions from bassist/bandleader/main songwriter Steve Harris in the group's catalog, but it is the unusually collaborative process by which the album was written that makes it the band's most complete and successful effort.

JOHN ABERCROMBIE
TIMELESS

John Abercrombie, guitar, comp.; Jan Hammer, keyboards, comp.; Jack DeJohnette, drums

ECM 1047 (LP). 1974. Manfred Eicher, prod.; Tony May, eng.

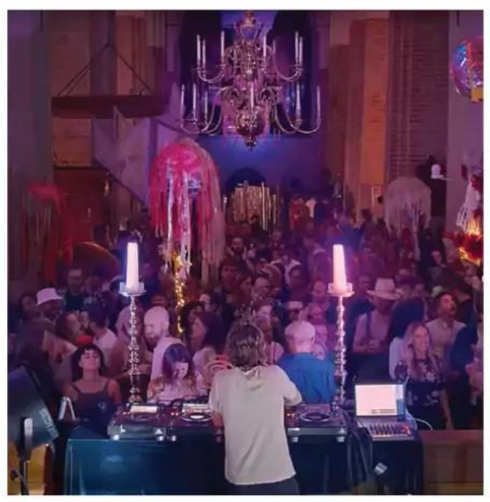
This was the 43rd album from the still-new German label ECM. It was also John

Abercrombie's debut as leader, the first of 28 albums he would make for the imprint until his 2017 death; alongside many sideman appearances, that makes him one of the label's most significant artists. The format of guitar, organ (Hammer, only six months removed from his time in the Mahavishnu Orchestra, also playing synthesizer and piano), and drums recalled Abercrombie's formative work in soul jazz.

JON IVERSON
EL BÚHO
EL BÚHO LIVE AT WATDAJEL, UTRECHT

YouTube. 2022. Self-produced, Self-released. bit.ly/ElBuhoLive

Yes, it's a video and yes, it's a deejay standing there pushing buttons and bouncing his head to the beats. You can ignore that part and just let the music run for an hour and a half. Recorded at the Watdajel festival in Utrecht, Netherlands, in late 2022, El Búho (Robin Perkins from England) creates much of this music in his studio and then mixes it live with other sources. In this set, his musical taste and



skillful slicing and dicing of birdsong alongside Latin American acoustic and electronica is excellent. El Búho also has many wonderful studio albums on Bandcamp. I'm old enough to remember the best underground FM deejays artfully stringing tracks together in the '60s and '70s (we called them "segues" back then). In this video, the art of sequencing music has evolved further using the tech and broadcast media of today.

MYRKUR
FOLKESANGE

Relapse Records (16/44.1 Bandcamp download). 2020. Christopher Juul, prod., eng.

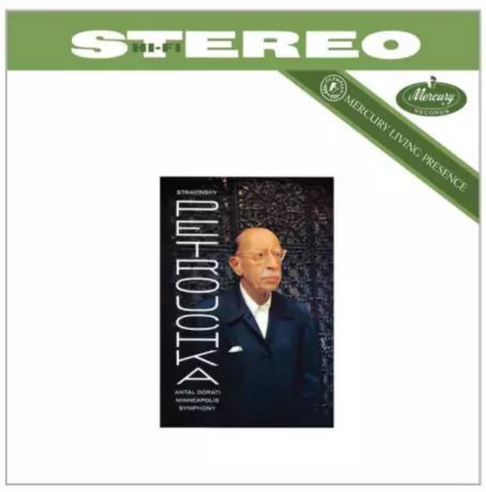
Myrkur (Amalie Brun) is renowned primarily as a Danish black-metal artist. This is not that Brun. There are no thrashing guitars and as far as I know, no references to the devil. Instead, she renders a modern spin on Nordic folk music using period acoustic instruments filtered via her metal sensibility. Evocative of dark Nordic winters, brief idyllic springtimes (depicted on the cover), and towering rocky cliffs, much of this album is somber—Myrkur is Icelandic for "darkness." Underpinned by a deep bass drum that punctuates the thrumming mandola, lyre, tagelharpa, and nyckelharpa, Amalie Brun's often-soaring voice alternates between sweet and severe just like the landscapes where these songs originate.

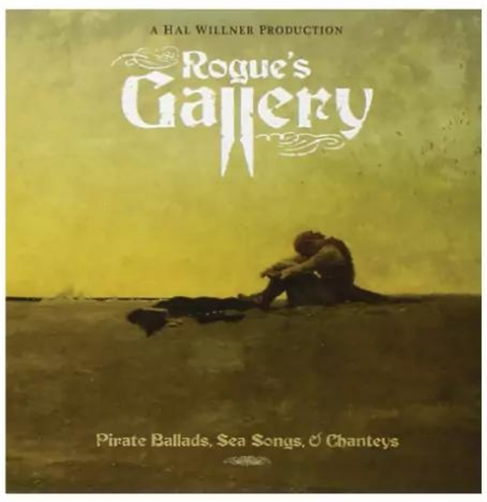
ANNE E. JOHNSON
STRAVINSKY
PETROUCHKA (COMPLETE)

Antal Doráti and Minnesota Symphony Orchestra

Mercury Living Presence SR90216 (LP). 1959. Wilma Cozart, prod.; C. Robert Fine, eng.

There are many great recordings of *Petrouchka*, but this one introduced me to the complete ballet, which remains one of my favorite 20th century pieces. Doráti approaches the recurring "Shrovetide Fair" theme with less seriousness than many conductors, recreating how the senses get overwhelmed in a crowded carnival





atmosphere. There's delight and wonder, but always with a dark undertone.

Doráti had recorded the 1911 version of the ballet, also with Minnesota, four years previously. This is Stravinsky's 1947 version, using a slightly smaller orchestra and tweaking a few passages for trumpet and percussion. The most striking aspect of this later Doráti recording is the sound production. Wilma Cozart and C. Robert Fine, true to their Mercury Living

Presence creed, captured a rich vibrancy from the MSO at Northrop Auditorium on the University of Minnesota campus. The orchestra's playing is tighter than on the 1955 attempt, which helps clarify the sound.

VARIOUS ARTISTS
ROGUE'S GALLERY: PIRATE BALLADS, SEA SONGS, AND CHANTEYS

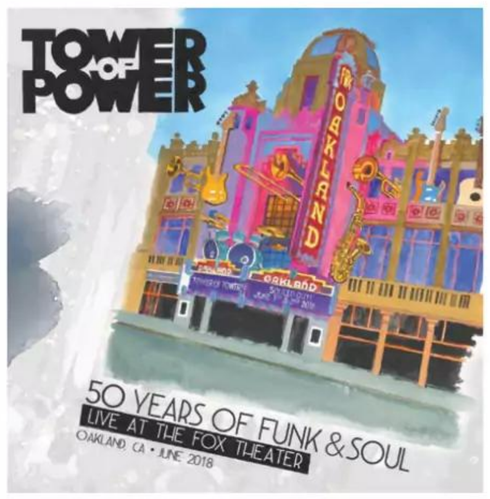
Anti- Records 86817-2 (2 CDs). 2006. Hal Willner, prod.; Martin Brumbach, mixing.

When director Gore Verbinski and actor Johnny Depp were working on the second *Pirates of the Caribbean* movie, a side project developed. They hired record producer Hal Willner to put together a two-CD set of seafaring songs for Anti- Records. (They ended up with so many great tracks that some were later released as *Son of Rogue's Gallery*.)

Besides the wonderful collection of rousing, rowdy, and heartrending songs, the lineup of talent is preposterous. Richard Thompson beckons the waves on "The Mingulay Boat Song." John C. Reilly contemplates the wisdom found from drinking. Rufus Wainwright and his mom, Kate McGarrigle, personify homesickness. In a pairing we didn't know we needed, Bryan Ferry and Antony (now known as Anohni) croon a haunting duet. Everything sung by Jack Shit would make a sailor blush. And then there are the tracks by Martin Carthy, Sting, Lou Reed, Bono, Jarvis Cocker, Van Dyke Parks, and on and on.

SASHA MATSON

TOWER OF POWER
50 YEARS OF FUNK & SOUL: LIVE AT THE FOX THEATER, OAKLAND



Chester Thompson, Jerry Cortez, Lenny Pickett, Emilio Castillo, David Garibaldi, others

Artistry Music ART7078LP (LP/CD). 2021. Joe Vannelli, Emilio Castillo, prods.; many engs.

Tower of Power played the '60s San Francisco psychedelic ballrooms, but they were East Bay all the way—Oakland, baby! With a large, smokin' horn section, the Tower could find the soul pocket and kick it, almost like they were in Memphis. As the leadoff track clearly puts it, "It ain't no joke, they done found the Oakland Stroke."

Celebrating 50 years in the business in 2018, the guys came to play, blowing the roof off the sucker. I went to high school with lead sax player Lennie Pickett; he could sit down at the corner of some building on the UC Berkeley campus, start playing his horn, and before you knew it, a crowd would be dancin' in the street. "Squib Cakes," "Souled Out," "What is Hip"—this is some of the tightest, funkiest R&B there is. Love it!

SHOSTAKOVICH
SYMPHONIES NOS. 2, 3, 12 & 13

Boston Symphony Orchestra / Andris Nelsons

Deutsche Grammophon B-0038492-02 (24/96 WAV). 2023. Nick Squire, Shawn Murphy, prod.; Shawn Murphy, eng.

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After eight years, with COVID intervening, the Boston Symphony and conductor Andris Nelsons have completed their much-praised cycle of the Shostakovich symphonies. These live performances were engineered by the ace veteran of film score and concert recording, Shawn Murphy. Symphony Hall in Boston contributes to the superb sonics; the low-end percussion sounds particularly spectacular throughout the series, and positively sci-fi in the blood-curdling fourth movement of the "Babi Yar" Symphony 13 here, titled "Fears." Right now, Shostakovich is the most important composer, living or not, who directly addresses today's troubled world. Dmitri knew that darkness that had happened before could happen again. Nelsons understands the importance of this music and gets the members of the Boston Symphony to play like their lives depend on it.

KEN MICALLEF

NORMAN BLAKE/TUT TAYLOR/SAM BUSH/ BUTCH ROBINS/ VASSAR CLEMENTS/ DAVID HOLLAND/ JETHRO BURNS

Flying Fish HDS 701 (LP). 1975. Hank Deane, prod.; Claude J. Hill, Bob Sowell, engs.

Featuring an all-star bluegrass cast with one exception—acoustic jazz bassist Dave Holland—this good-time party jam session sounds rich, big, and deeply resonant. But it's the performances that hold sway, as on Holland's long solo intro to "Sauerkraut 'N Solar Energy," bluegrass/jazz standard "Sweet Georgia Brown," and the closing track, "Vassar & Dave." Each musician is a master of his instrument, all giving and taking as the songs flow like the Mississippi River in summertime.

BOARDS OF CANADA
MUSIC HAS THE RIGHT TO CHILDREN

Warp Records/SKAM warplp55r/ skalp1 (LP). 1998/2013. Michael Sandison, Marcus Eoin, prods./engs.

As unsettling today as when it was released, BOC's *Music Has the Right to Children* places uncomfortable, queasy samples against gentle block-rocking beats. As the music unfolds like a surreal travelogue, surreal keyboards intone dark moods, along with oft-unintelligible and scary spoken-word snippets and horror movie–worthy melodies. The cover image of parents and children with facial features removed posits a dark soundtrack to missing posters or amber alerts but with a twist—you can either dance or daydream to it, you decide.

MIKE METTLER

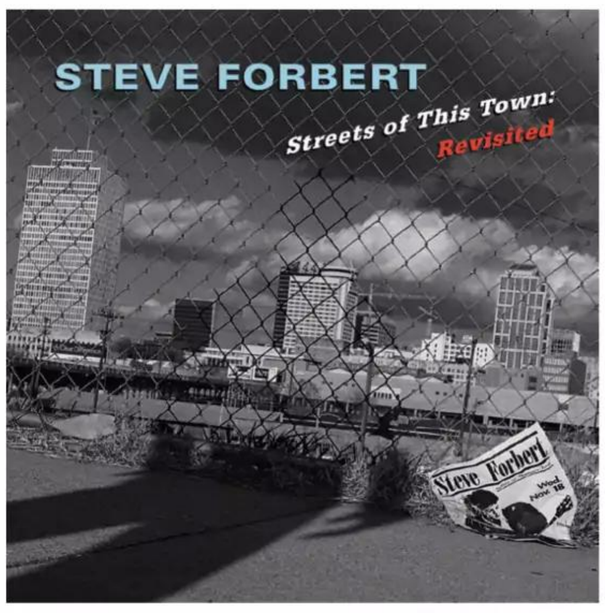
SECRET MACHINES
NOW HERE IS NOWHERE

Reprise 9362 48544-1 (2 LP). 2004. Secret Machines, Jeff Blenkinsopp, prods.; Daniel Wise, Rudyard Caruthers, Geoff Sanoff, engs.

I'm no fan of the phrase "power pop." In the case of Secret Machines, the genre designation takes on an entirely different meaning. To wit: the *power* of this Texas-bred three-man band's 2004 debut, *Now Here Is Nowhere*, absolutely *pops* from my speakers, at a level most post-prog metal progenitors only wish they could harness. The unrelenting, pummeling drums/hi-hat combo, sinister keyboard fills, throttling sub-bass, and channel-surfing space-laser guitar attack that infuses all nine minutes of lead track "First Wave Intact"—countered with the more ethereal ethos of "The Leaves Are Gone"—make *Nowhere* a welcome recurring dropped-pin destination.

STEVE FORBERT
STREETS OF THIS TOWN: REVISITED

Blue Rose Music BRM 1085 (LP). 2023. Garry Tallent, prod.; Jan Topoleski, Steve Puntolillo, engs.



Revisiting albums can be risky business for artists not named Swift, but veteran troubadour Steve Forbert struck gold with this recent recalibration of his 1988 Geffen comeback, *Streets of This Town*. Forbert has *not* re-recorded the album; rather, he enlisted remix engineer Steve Puntolillo to redefine its core values. "Perfect Stranger" brings Forbert's throaty lead vocal more out front, much better complemented by his recast acoustic guitar figures and Paul Errico's piano fills. The acoustic trip to "Mexico" sees further accentuation of its inner Johnny Cash grit.

JULIE MULLINS

PIXIES
SURFER ROSA

4AD/Rough Trade Rough US38 (LP). 1988. Steve Albini, prod., eng.

In 1989, *Surfer Rosa* became my baptism by fire into what used to be called alternative rock. It unleashes a visceral experience, musically and lyrically—a quick, wild, and dirty ride. The 34-minute race to the finish diverges in all directions: punk thrashes, bizarre quasi-bal-

lads, searing guitar solos, acoustic guitar flourishes, occasional singing in Spanish.

Feral energy fills Steve Albini's raw, experimental production, from Black Francis's (Frank Black's) caterwauling vocals to many tracks' swift dynamic contrasts. Percussion hits hard, punctuating occasional prettiness such as Kim Deal's (credited here as Mrs. John Murphy) singing on "Gigantic." Off-kilter humor pops up: a piss-takingly long and repetitive guitar outro ("Gigantic"), and non sequitur outtakes of bandmember banter.

It's not Pixies' most accessible release; if you're turned off, try the next track. Yet its significance persists; it influenced Nirvana and countless other bands. After my first excited teenaged listen to a cassette dub—before buying the 4AD LP post-haste—I recalled thinking, "What just happened?" Unhinged brilliance.

THIEVERY CORPORATION
THE MIRROR CONSPIRACY

Eighteenth Street Lounge Music ESL ESL033LP (2 LP). 2000/2014. Rob Garza, Eric Hilton, prod.; Desmond Williams, Howie Weinberg, eng.

Overflowing with global influences—France, Jamaica, Brazil, the Middle East and North Africa—this 2000 studio release is steeped in eclectic sophistication. Trip hop, (acid) jazz, lounge, dub, club/dance, ambient, bossa nova, etc., emerge and converge. Hypnotic and

majestic, the album satiates my cravings for stylistic variety while setting a tone for chilling out. DC-based duo Sean Garza and Eric Hilton, who sport suits for the cover photos, offer world music's intersections with electronica, jazz, and mid/downtempo fit for a late-night lounge or lounging in front of your hi-fi. It invites closer listening *and* plays well in the background. Many guest vocalists and musicians appear, including Bebel Gilberto on "Só Com Você" and the late Pam Bricker, whose cool, conspiratorial sensuality lulls listeners in closer on "Lebanese Blonde"—a 1998 single whose title refers to a type of hashish—and the title track.

I owned this on CD first, but the 2014 two-LP reissue enhances the experience. It might seem too slickly produced or pretentious for some—the tailor of their suits received a liner note credit (Roxy Music!)—but no matter. The tracks encourage mellowing out and listening into different grooves—both essential to survival in a messy world.

THOMAS J. NORTON

SAINT-SAËNS
SYMPHONY NO.3 ("ORGAN SYMPHONY")

Iveta Apkalna, organ; Frankfurt Radio Symphony Orchestra, Riccardo Minasi.

bit.ly/FrankfurtSaint-Saens

Rimsky-Korsakov

RIMSKY-KORSAKOV
SCHEHERAZADE

Sinfónica de Galicia, Gimnazija Kranj Symphony Orchestra, Nejc Bečan, cond.

Matjaž Culiberg, tonmeister. bit.ly/Galecia

YouTube won't win any best sound awards on the music it presents, but the sound can be respectable once you rescue it from your TV's audio and resettle it into a better system.

But don't ignore the video side here; there's much to be gained from not only hearing music being made but in seeing the musicians who are making it. I've recently experienced a pair of exceptional classical performances that do both exceptionally well.

A warhorse to be sure, but this performance of Saint-Saëns's *Organ Symphony* is so vigorous, particularly in the final movement, where everyone gives their all, it's hard to resist.

Another warhorse, this is a youth orchestra, with all of the participants in their late teens and early 20s. The performance is exceptional, the sound good, and the musicians delightful to watch. Keep an ear out for the first violinist, who gives a performance far beyond his years.

DAN OUELLETTE

TODD SICKAFOOSE
BEAR PROOF

Todd Sickafoose, acoustic bass; Erik Deutsch, piano; Ben Goldberg, clarinet; Kirk Knuffke, cornet; Adam Levy, guitar; Jenny Scheinman, violin; Rob Reich, accordion; Allison Miller, drums

Group Chirp Music (CD). 2023. Todd Sickafoose, prod.; Adam Muñoz, eng.

Bassist and composer Todd Sickafoose's grand jazz symphony of composition meets improvisation that defies categorization. *Bear Proof* is created by a simpatico octet that at times moves eerily with mystery, buoys with a gentle lyricism, colors the soundscape with instrumental tones and blending timbres, haunts with walls of rhythm, scrapes with gripping *avant* pockets that create moments where melodies emerge at the edge of beauty in what the leader calls "a surreal meditation on boom and bust." It's visionary. Majestic but also humbling in the face of cataclysmic collapse. One of my favorite albums of 2023.

JONI MITCHELL
COURT AND SPARK

Asylum 1001-2 (CD). 1973. Joni Mitchell, prod.; Henry Lewy, Ellis Sorkin, engs.

Fifty years ago, Joni Mitchell pivoted. I was never a fan of her folk life and songs, but *Court and Spark* spoke volumes when I took a chance on it based on "Help Me," her radio hit. I discovered a gold mine. Instead of performing as a solo act, Mitchell distanced herself from filling the soundspace with her spare instrumentation and falsetto-to-alto vocals and enlisted a band of jazz fusion specialists from Los Angeles. The recording marks the beginning of Mitchell's most experimental—and controversial—musical sensibility, eclipsing all associations with her

folk-goddess brand while also embracing an expansive horizon where art and entertainment commingle and baffle. It was the beginning of Mitchell's deep dive into jazz, which would last for the rest of the decade.

HERB REICHERT

ISABELLE FAUST

STRAVINSKY: HISTOIRE DU SOLDAT (VERSION FRANÇAIS), ÉLÉGIE, DUO CONCERTANT

Harmonia Mundi/Qobuz (24/96 FLAC). 2021. Martin Sauer, prod., Sauer, Julian Schwenkner, eng.

My relationship to contemporary classical musicians, like my current favorite violinist Isabelle Faust, is pure fanboy. More than simply admiring their playing or musical insight, I

become enamored with their persona. And sometimes I become obsessed with their latest album. Such is the case with Faust's incredibly well-recorded version of Stravinsky's Faustian parable *L'histoire du soldat*. While I listen Isabelle occupies my room, and the sound of her instrument raises my hair. But it is Dominique Horwitz's narration that grips me hardest. It shows an uncanny sense of vocal form and an affecting sonic presence.

Five-star sound and performance.

PHAROAH SANDERS

PHAROAH

Pharoah Sanders, tenor saxophone, percussion, vocals, bells; Hays Burnett, bass, percussion; Clifford Jarvis, drums; Khalid Moss, piano, electric piano; Bedria Sanders, harmonium; Steve Neil, bass; Tisziji Muñoz, guitar; Greg Bandy, drums; Clifton "Jiggs" Chase, keyboards; Laurence Killian, percussion

Luaka Bop 6 80899 0090-1-0 and 6 80899 5051-1-6 (2 LP). 2023. Yale Evelev & Eric Welles-Nyström, Bob Cummins, prods.; Colin Young, Chris Bellman, engs.

As much as I was enamored with Sun Ra and Alice Coltrane in the early 1970s, in 1977 I wasn't yet hip, spiritual, or deep-minded enough to purchase Pharoah Sanders's original album *Pharoah* on India Navigation. Thankfully, I am getting to explore that album now, in my maturity, via Luaka Bop's luxuriously packaged, bounteously endowed two-LP box set, which features a brisk remastering of *Pharoah* plus a second disk entitled *Harvest Time Live 1977*, which includes two not-previously-released live performances of Sanders's composition "Harvest Time" from that same year. Being able to compare these three performances is the set's main joy. Inside the box, there's a 23-page book and a heavy paper repo of a poster

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The CNC's casework also features one of Kostas' patternation called "Geometrika" which creates a visual patina of squares and rectangles recessed into an organic shape - requiring the most advanced 5-axis CNC machine to create it. Other patternations will be offered similar to those used in Kostas' Haute Creation work for S.T. Dupont of Paris.

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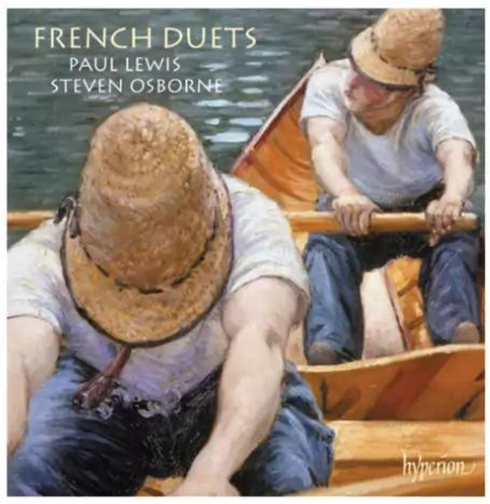
from Copenhagen's Jazzhus Montmartre, plus a full coffee table spread of Pharoah Sanders memorabilia.

KALMAN RUBINSON
FRENCH DUETS: WORKS FOR PIANO, FOUR HANDS BY FAURÉ, POULENC, DEBUSSY, STRAVINSKY AND RAVEL

Paul Lewis, Steven Osborne, piano

Hyperion CDA68329. 2021. Stephen Johns, prod.; Oscar Torres, eng.

Thoroughly delightful and irresistible. Almost every piece will be familiar, although often in different arrangements. Fauré's *Dolly* kicks it off with lilt and charm; the concluding "Les pas espagnol" always brings



a smile to my face. Poulenc's *Sonata for Four Hands* winks at its drama. Debussy's *Six épigraphes antiques* and *Petite Suite* and Ravel's *Ma mère l'Oye* need no introduction. Honorary Frenchman Stravinsky's *Three Easy Pieces* are equally captivating. Played with both brio and grace by Lewis and Osborne and recorded with presence and clarity, *French Duets* has become the most played recording in my collection!

MARTINŮ
COMPLETE CELLO SONATAS

Johannes Moser, cello; Andrei Korobeinikov, piano

Pentatone PTC5187007 (5.1 24/192 PCM download). 2022. Karel Bruggeman, prod., eng.

Martinů's three cello sonatas span the middle of the 20th century, encompassing WWII and the Czech composer's migration across Europe and on to the United States. The first sonata, written when he was an emigre in Paris in 1939, reveals in its Bohemian flavors a longing for home. The second, written following his flight to NYC in 1941, is

more edgy and sorrowful and reflects a state of mind in a world at war. From the first note of the third, dated 1952, one hears clear, postwar American influence and optimism. These are melodious and moving depictions of the era. His musical vocabulary is tonal and romantic and will appeal to lovers of Rachmaninoff.

Moser and Korobeinikov

ROBERT SCHRYER
LEE ROBINSON MACHINE
FAMILY ALBUM

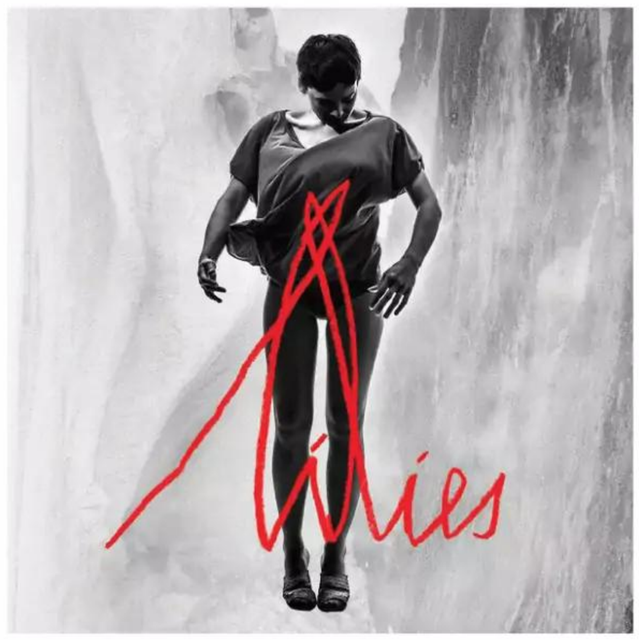
Modern Classic Recordings MR 356 MCR 919 (LP). 1997/2015. Javier Colis, Javier Piñango, Lee Robinson, engs.

Both my picks this year have the distinction of being albums whose content starts off strong and keeps getting better. The first is Lee Robinson Machine's *Family Album*. Englishman Lee Robinson is the machine. He played all the instruments on the record, sang all the vocals, designed the album cover. The songs, which are built around sparse arrangements led by voice, guitar, and keyboards, sound simple at first—but pay attention and you begin to hear what I heard: creative ingenuity, charismatic talent, mellifluous melodies, and authenticity. This is music sheered of excess, molded into yearnings for acceptance. It still sounds fresh 26 years after its release—and timelessly indie. It's punk attitude without violence, feral but sweet, youthful, uplifting, real, gritty, and tinged with vulnerability. Robinson died in Spain from cancer four years later, at age 44. Although he'd made other albums with other bands, *Family Album* is the only solo record he released. What an earnest, heartfelt statement.

MELANIE DE BIASIO
LILIES

Melanie De Biasio, vocals, flute, electric and acoustic guitars, piano, arr.; Pascal Paulus, backing vocals, piano, clavinet, synthesizer, electric guitar, beats, effects [R-bass], drums, tambourine, arr.; Dré Pallemaerts, drums, sampler (drum samples); Pascal Mohy, piano

PLAY IT AGAIN SAM PIASL070CDX (CD). Chloé Pilon, Stéphanie Rophille, Melanie De Biasio, Pascal Paulus, prods.; John Davis, Catherine Marks, engs.



I have Philip O'Hanlon of On a Higher Note, distributor of Graham Audio speakers and other brands, to thank for turning me on to this album, the third by Belgian jazz singer, flutist, and composer Melanie De Biasio. O'Hanlon turned me on to this when he played it at one of his audio show demos. He (and she) had me at the first track, "Your Freedom is the End of Me," a smouldering, James Bond–sounding composition whose hypnotic tempo sets the tone for the rest of the album. Instrumental arrangements are minimal, consisting mostly of piano, beats, and atmospheric studio effects orbiting De Biasio's sensual, evocative voice—think Patricia Barber with a more electronic groove-oriented sensibility and a tad more soul and you'll get the idea. The songs sound profound, as if De Biasio was sharing intimate secrets, some delivered with throbbing urgency, others whispered in private. By the end of the album, if you're lucky, you'll emerge stirred but not shaken, wondering how long you were gone.

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recorded this shortly after the attack on Ukraine and take note of Martinů's history. As a result, they offer intense and committed performances captured in vivid presence by Pentatone. The three sonatas, especially as played here, are major statements from the past century.

JASON VICTOR SERINUS
SHOSTAKOVICH
SYMPHONIES NOS. 2, 3, 12 & 13 "BABI YAR"

Boston Symphony Orchestra, Andris Nelsons.

Deutsche Grammophon 4864965 (24/96 WAV download). 2023. Shawn Murphy, Nick Squire, prods.; Murphy and Squire, engs.

There are many urgent reasons why this recording is essential. First is the inventive brilliance and overwhelming visceral, emotional impact of Shostakovich's music, brought to vivid life by Nelsons and the BSO. Then there's the superbly recorded live recording—a percussion lover's dream—set down in the fabled acoustic of Boston's Symphony Hall.

Equally important are the vocal contributions of master baritone Matthias Goerne, who sings with such conviction as to make his recording of Symphony No.13 seem the culmination of three decades before the public, and those of the Tanglewood Festival Chorus and New England Conservatory Symphonic Choir.

SANDRINE PIAU
REFLET; SONGS BY BERLIOZ, DUPARC, KOECHCLIN, DEBUSSY, RAVEL, BRITTEN

Piau, soprano; Orchestre Victor Hugo, Jean-François Verdier.

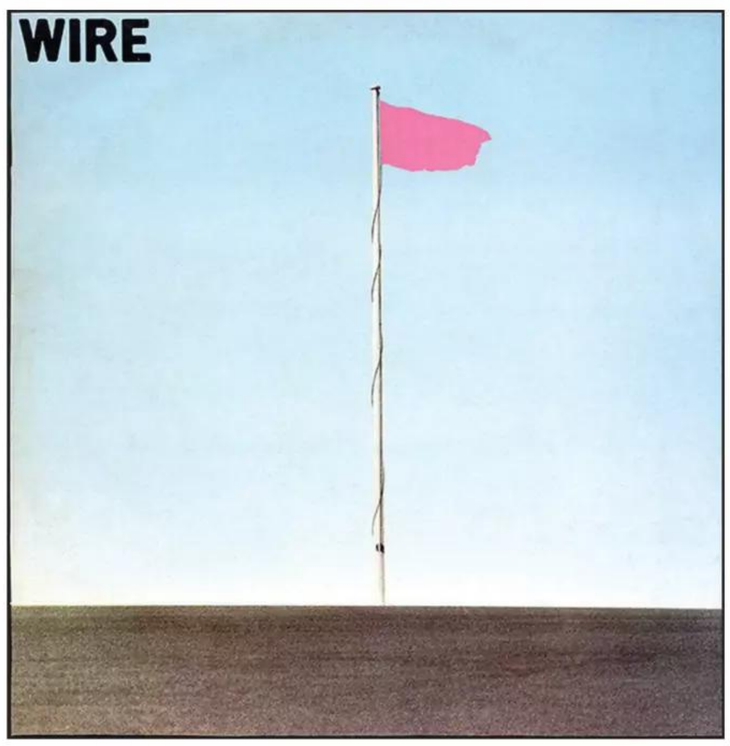
Alpha 1019 (24/96 WAV download/stream). 2023. Vincent Mons, Laure Casenave, engs.

In her three-decade career, Piau has spread out from early music to music of later periods. Now in her late 50s, her voice has grown more substantial and her presentation increasingly profound, without any sacrifice of freshness and beauty. She is something of an artistic and vocal miracle. This program finds her right in her *fach*, singing settings of great poetry in her native language. While some have recorded these songs with more freedom of tempo, few have achieved Piau's mixture of vocal sheen, refinement, and sincerity. The more you listen, the deeper you sink into the elusive meanings of her chosen composers and the poetry they embrace. The beautifully recorded orchestra plays wonderfully, bringing its translucent strings to two orchestral selections as well as Piau's repertoire.

MICHAEL TREI
WIRE
PINK FLAG

Harvest SHSP 4078 (LP). 1977. Mike Thorne, prod.; Paul Hardiman, eng.

Wire started life in 1976 as a punk band and gained exposure from their two tracks on the early live compilation *The Roxy London WC2*. A few months later, their debut album *Pink Flag* showed that they had ambitions that went way beyond rapid-fire headbanging punk; their art school roots were clearly on display for those who cared to look. With 21 songs in under 36 minutes, Pink Flag never dawdles, but those little ditties would soon become massively influential on the burgeoning post-punk scene, as clearly displayed on Wire's own follow-up, *Chairs Missing*, released nine months later.



JUNE TABOR WITH MARTIN SIMPSON
A CUT ABOVE

Topic Records 12TS410 (LP). 1980. Paul Brown, prod.; John Acock, eng.

This collaboration between folk singer June Tabor and guitarist Martin Simpson, Englanders both, came quite early in their careers, each seemingly pushing the other to greater things than they had delivered solo. Songs include Richard Thompson's dark but beautiful "Strange Affair" and a haunting a cappella version of Roger Watson's "Number Two Top Seam," which tells the story of a coal mining disaster. The sound is superb, capturing Simpson's spare, percussive guitar playing and Tabor's rich, emphatic voice perfectly.

ROGIER VAN BAKEL
THAIKKUDAM BRIDGE
NAMAH

Wonderwall Media/Mathrubhumi Music 3616402635664 (16/44.1 stream. Qobuz). 2019. Thaikkudam Bridge, prod.; Ashok Nelson, Vipin Lal, Christin Jos, Amith Bal, Rajan K S, Hemanth Mukundan, Jayakrishnan Nalinkumar, Frank Arkwright, Amith Bal Kenath, engs.

This expertly recorded second album from Thaikkudam Bridge, a 12-piece band from Kerala, India, offers an amalgam of Southeast Asian and Western styles. Indian vocal scales combine with imaginative metal and hard-driving prog-rock.

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Anne Bisson

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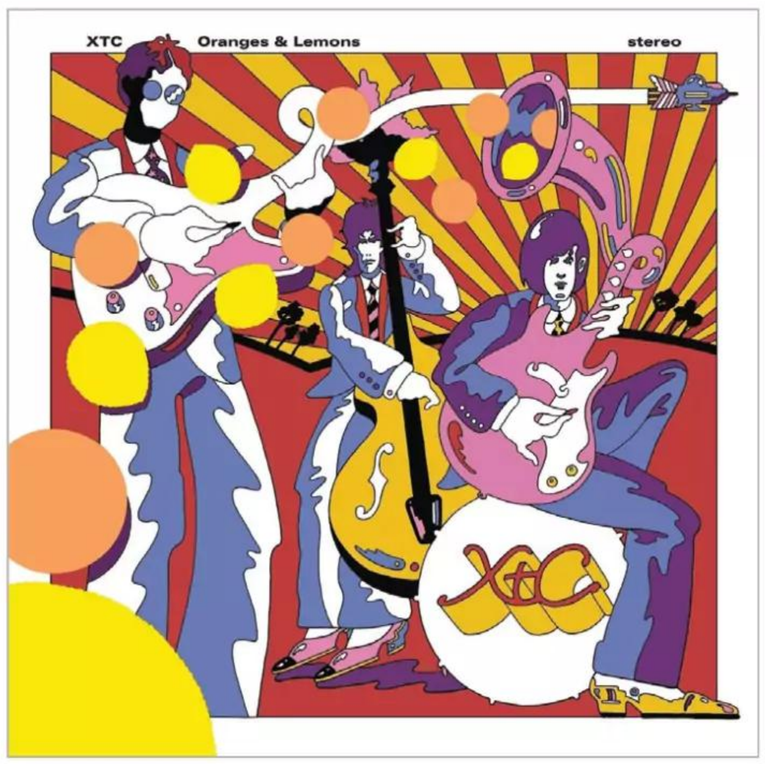
Providing further world-music flair is a cast of guest players that includes English guitar ace Guthrie Govan and local *mohan veena* virtuoso V.M. Bhatt. *Namah*'s 10 tracks, sung in English, Hindi, Malayalam, and Tamil, are spread out over almost 70 minutes, but there's no noodling or self-indulgence here. Fresh ideas flow from start to finish, and the band is exhilaratingly tight. Lead singer Peethambaran Menon sometimes sounds like a resurrected Chris Cornell—not a bad thing. I suspect that Steven Wilson and Metallica are influences, but Thaikkudam Bridge has perfected a style all its own.

XTC
ORANGES AND LEMONS

Virgin 0724385063855 (CD). 1989. Paul Fox, prod.; Ed Thacker, eng.

XTC disbanded almost a quarter-century ago, but the quintessential Britpop trio's influence endures, and many of frontman Andy Partridge's immaculately crafted songs form a soundtrack to a good chunk of my life. Except for 1992's *Nonsuch*, no XTC record scales dizzying creative peaks the way *Oranges and Lemons* does. Boisterous and bright in mood, the songs practically glisten with opulent instrumentation. My only criticism of *O&L* is that the arrangements are so relentlessly busy that they wear on the listener; good thing the album ends with a track that leaves space between the notes. That masterful closer, "Chalkhills and Children," is another of Partridge's paeans to country living and fatherhood, no less effective for also being psychedelically tinged and Beatles- and Beach Boys–adjacent. *O&L* is a wonderland of beguiling melodies splashed in Day-Glo colors, and a terrific introduction to XTC if the band's existence somehow passed you by.



STEPHEN FRANCIS VASTA

NIELSEN
VIOLIN CONCERTO, FLUTE CONCERTO, CLARINET CONCERTO

Nikolaj Znaider, violin; Robert Langevin, flute; Anthony McGill, clarinet; New York Philharmonic/Alan Gilbert

DaCapo 6.220556 (SACD). 2015. Preben Iwan, Mats Engström, prods.; Preben Iwan, eng.

DaCapo's collection brilliantly evokes the New York Philharmonic's Nielsen "traditions," fired up by Leonard Bernstein but in abeyance since he left. It also brings Nikolaj Znaider back to discographic attention, in a full-bodied, impeccably tuned rendering of the youthful Violin Concerto. In the two woodwind concerti, the orchestra's first-desk soloists, facing formidable in-house competition from predecessors Julius Baker and Stanley Drucker, acquit themselves admirably, especially Anthony McGill, every bit as liquid and deft as the seemingly eternal Drucker. Gilbert and the orchestra provide alert, colorful backings, and the sonics, even in plain frontal stereo, are brilliant and deep.

VAUGHAN WILLIAMS
ANTARCTICA

Symphony 7 ("Sinfonia antarctica"); Fantasia on a Theme of Thomas Tallis

Roger Allam, narrator; Dominique Labelle, soprano; Indianapolis Symphony/Raymond Leppard

Koss Classics KC 2214 (CD). 1993. Michael J. Koss, prod.; Larry Rock, eng.

Until this recording, Vaughan Williams's attempt to forge his *Scott of the Antarctic* soundtrack into a full-scale symphony has never worked for me. The production on the too-short-lived Koss Classics label is the first I find convincing. Leppard's edition adds extended narrations—longer than the composer's prescribed superscriptions—over the music. I've seen negative reactions to this—the result is almost more travelogue than symphony—but the piece finally plays out in a broad arc rather than as a collection of miscellaneous bits. I'd have liked heftier strings, but the Indianapolis orchestra plays with warmth and focus (in the *Tallis Fantasia* as well), and the recording is crisp and lucid.

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AURAL ROBERT

BY ROBERT BAIRD

THIS ISSUE: A live Gram Parsons concert, from the archives.

The Last Roundup

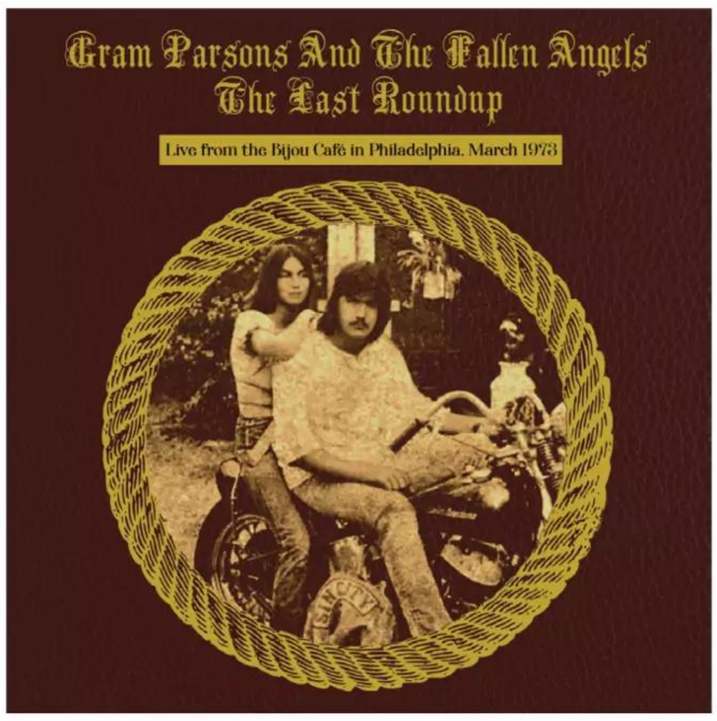
"When I first listened to the tape I thought, *this is so good that if I do anything else in my life, I have to make sure the world hears this*," David Prinz says with obvious intensity. "That's how I really feel. It makes me happy that all these Gram fans are finally going to get to hear what he was really like live."

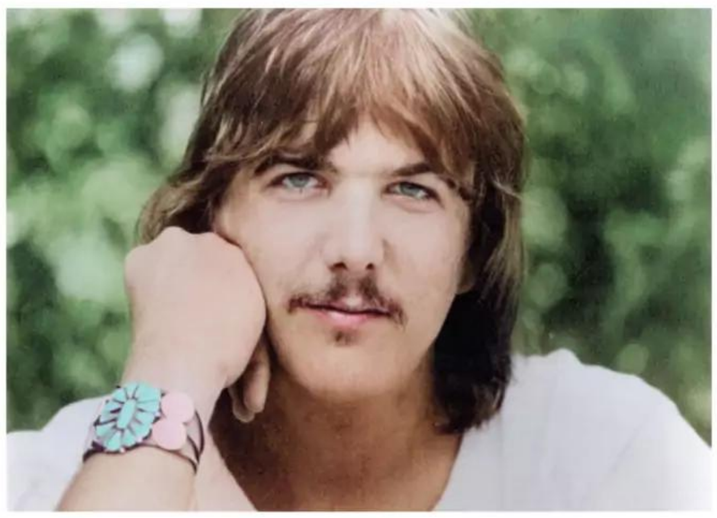
The love of music can drive human beings to astonishing lengths. For Prinz, cofounder/owner of California's Amoeba Music chain, that fervor revolves around the work of country-rock pioneer Gram Parsons. Despite the often-outlandish mythology that's grown up around this shooting star since his tragic 1973 overdose at age 26, Prinz has made it his quixotic mission to find, restore, and release unreleased Gram Parsons live shows. It's a process that involves the often-insurmountable challenge of legally clearing the ownership of source tapes by financially settling with everyone involved. It's not a struggle for the faint of heart or wallet.

In 2007, in this magazine, I wrote about Prinz's first Parsons project, *Gram Parsons with The Flying Burrito Brothers, Live at the Avalon Ballroom*, the first release in what Prinz then called the *Gram Parsons Archives*. After a nightmarish clearance tussle, Prinz and his partner in the Parsons projects, Gram's daughter Polly Parsons, needed a break. When he and Polly finally decided to ready another release, they launched a Kickstarter campaign, which eventually raised $133,944. Several 10" EPs of unreleased Gram material, which Prinz admits are of lesser sonic quality, were used as rewards in the Kickstarter appeal. The ultimate goal was the album presented here, *The Last Roundup*, by Gram Parsons and the Fallen Angels.

Released on CD and double-LP on the Amoeba Music label for the November 2023 Record Store Day, *The Last Roundup* documents an unreleased March 16, 1973, show at the Bijou Café in Philadelphia, highlighted by Gram's duets with Emmylou Harris, his singing partner on both his solo albums. The source for this new release is a soundboard cassette given to the band's pedal-steel player, Neil Flanz, on the night of the show. Flanz had it converted to a CD, which eventually ended up with the ever-resourceful Prinz. The vinyl was pressed at Microforum in Toronto, Canada. *The Last Roundup* uses a cover photo Gram intended as the cover art for his second release, which became *Grievous Angel*. The passion, endless time, and financial resources Prinz is willing to expend on sonic restoration is heroic. He plans to press more LPs if the initial RSD run sells out.

"It's a great show," Prinz says of the Bijou performance in a recent telephone interview from California. "Gram was totally on and totally present. And Emmylou was always the consummate professional. You could hear their voices, which is the most important thing if you're really into Gram, to hear what he's doing and the nuances. And I've never heard them so clearly over the instrumentation, rather than having to pick them out through the instrumentation.





"The sound off the tape was pretty good," Prinz continues. "It had some issues. It had dropouts, some volume modulation, some underlying static, and more than anything, had distortion. That was the biggest problem. Distortion is so hard to get out. Originally, for sonic restoration, I went with Paul Stubblebine, the guy who remastered the Avalon show and did a really good job. He worked on the Bijou tape for a year or so. He got the distortion out, but he took some of the life out of it, too. A friend then said, 'You have to use Gary Hobish, he's the best archival sound guy in the world.' So, I call Gary, he's in San Francisco, and I go to his lab and he's a big Gram fan. He starts showing me stuff he can do with the voices, the instrumentation. He's like a magician, this guy. He's amazing.

"We did at least 20 passes on it," he says with a knowing tone, remembering the endless listening. "At the end, though, there was one thing we couldn't fix, which was in the track 'Sin City.' It had this underlying static, underlying hiss, and Gary couldn't get it out. I thought, *I know somebody who can get it*. Shai Fishman; he's the head of noise reduction at Wave Audio. So, I brought Shai in and $5000 later, there's no more underlying static," he recalls, laughing.

A launch party for the album was held shortly before Record Store Day at the Grammy Museum in Hollywood, with Sierra Ferrell performing. The next day, Prinz and Polly Parsons went to the storied Chateau Marmont for lunch. There, on a turntable set up in the great room where Gram sat for the cover shot of his debut album, *GP*, they put on *The Last Roundup*.

"It sounded so good," Prinz raves. "A lot of people don't quite understand why people love Gram the way they do, and Gram and Emmylou the way they do, but I think if you listen to this, you will get it."

Reached in her car in Los Angeles (where else?), Polly Parsons said she has learned more about her father through *The Last Roundup*. "This is an intimate performance full of clarity, and you can hear the joy. And to be honest, the innocence and the beginnings of something for Emmylou. You can hear her authenticity and her vulnerability. It's kind of like peeking through a window of time that is priceless. It allows you to feel an essence of my father that few ever got to know. To me, it feels like a love letter." ■

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REVINYLIZATION

BY ROBERT BAIRD

THIS ISSUE: *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.* turns 50

Bruce Begins

In Jan Swafford's excellent 2020 Mozart biography *The Reign of Love*, he intimately weaves the composer's life story with the music he created. Along the way, he confirms a legendary scene. Played to the hilt in *Amadeus*, Milos Forman's 1984 film adaptation of Peter Shaffer's play, the then-reigning Hapsburg monarch, Joseph II, rushes backstage after the premiere of Mozart's first operatic blockbuster, *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, and opines, "Too beautiful for our [Viennese] ears, my dear Mozart, and monstrous many notes." Sassy by nature or perhaps just stung by the implied criticism, Mozart supposedly replied, "Exactly as many as necessary, Your Majesty."

That quote rings in my head each time I listen to Bruce Springsteen's still-astonishing 1973 debut album, *Greetings from Asbury Park, N.J.*, which has just turned 50 and been reissued in Mobile Fidelity's Ultradisc One-Step series.

After seeing The E Street Band and its skinny, bearded, live-wire frontman play in 1973, I was eager to hear this oddly titled first album. After I ripped off the shrink and flipped back the postcard packaging, it became clear immediately that the eager, urgent 23-year-old urban poet from Long Branch, New Jersey, suffered from a malaise similar to Mozart's: in this case, too many words. But it's precisely that detailed verbal fury—the energetic sense of an ambitious street poet who occasionally got carried away—that animates *Greetings* and makes it such a rich masterpiece. From the opening stanza of the album's first song, "Blinded by the Light," it's clear that this kid from North Jersey is a lyrical gunslinger with aspirational chops: "Madman drummers bummers and Indians in the summer with a teenage diplomat/In the dumps with the mumps as the adolescent pumps his way into his hat."

The album's other single, "Spirit in the Night," recorded with just Springsteen, drummer Vini Lopez, and a newly arrived Clarence Clemons, is nothing less than a psychedelic word storm. Springsteen populates a wild night of teen abandon with his first set of mythical characters, including Wild Billy, Hazy Davy, Crazy Janey, Killer Joe, G-Man, and Mission Man. Some of the album's best lyrical moments follow: "By the time we made it up to/Greasy Lake I had my head out the window and Janey's fingers were in the cake/I think I really dug her 'cause I was too loose to fake/I said, 'I'm hurt.' She said, 'Honey, let me heal it.'"

In *Greetings*'s most obvious love song, "For You," there's the whiff of Rosalitas to come as he pushes his lyrical gifts to the edge: "Didn't you think I knew that you were born with the power of a locomotive/able to leap tall buildings in a single bound?/And your Chelsea suicide with no apparent motive/you could laugh and cry in a single sound."

The word maelstrom reaches its peak in the rousing closer, "It's Hard to be a Saint in the City." A character we associate with the songwriter sings in a tough growl about his "skin like leather" and his "diamond-hard look of a cobra." Then he swaggers, "I could walk like Brando right into the sun/Then dance just like a Casanova" before shifting to more of a whisper as the language throws the sparks: "With my blackjack and jacket and hair slicked sweet/Silver star studs on my duds just like a Harley in heat." The whisper returns several times before this "backstreet gambler with the luck to lose" adds the punch line: "It's so hard to be a saint when you're just a boy out on the street."

One of the current vinyl reissue boom's most enduring mysteries is why neither of the first two entries in Springsteen's hallowed catalog has ever had individual Columbia/Sony deluxe-LP reissues. Nor, until now, has *Greetings* or *The Wild, The Innocent & The E Street Shuffle* ever been licensed to a high-quality audiophile label for reissue, as *Born to Run* was to Classic Records in 2005. The lack of reissues with upgraded sonics may be related to the long-time controversy over the dodgy, at times muddy sound of those first two albums, a condition usually traced back to 914 Sound Studios in Blauvelt, New York. A converted gas station, owned by Brooks Arthur, Phil Ramone, Art Ward, and Don Frey, "914" (after the area code) was abandoned for The Record Plant in Manhattan after the recording of the single, "Born to Run." Bruce's then-manager Jon Landau was unimpressed by the studio's facilities, gear, and piano that wouldn't stay in tune.

The first *Greetings* remaster was by Bob Ludwig in 2014; he remastered all the early albums for *The Album Collection, Vol. 1 1973–1984*. This new 180gm One-Step LP was mastered by Krieg Wunderlich and Shawn R. Britton; MoFi prominently displays its mastering chain: "1/4" / 15ips analog master to DSD 256 to analog console to lathe." The new record has clearer sound, an airier presence, and marginally more punch than several original pressings I own or the 2014 remaster. The low-end, always a glaring sonic flaw in this recording, has been audibly improved. Beautifully pressed and packaged in a thinner and less-grand slip case, that takes up less room on your shelf, this new One-Step is the best sounding *Greetings* yet.

As Springsteen artistically toggled between wanting to be an urban troubadour in the mold of Bob Dylan and a sweat-drenched, R&B rocker willing to turn up the electric guitars and connect with an audience, *Greetings* was his first attempt to capture some of both on a recording. This debut album is most essential as audible evidence of the boy before The Boss, still innocent but growing miraculously as a person and songwriter. As he sings in "Growin' Up," the LP's second song, this is where he's discovering that balance where "my feet they finally took root in the earth but I got me a nice little place in the stars." ■

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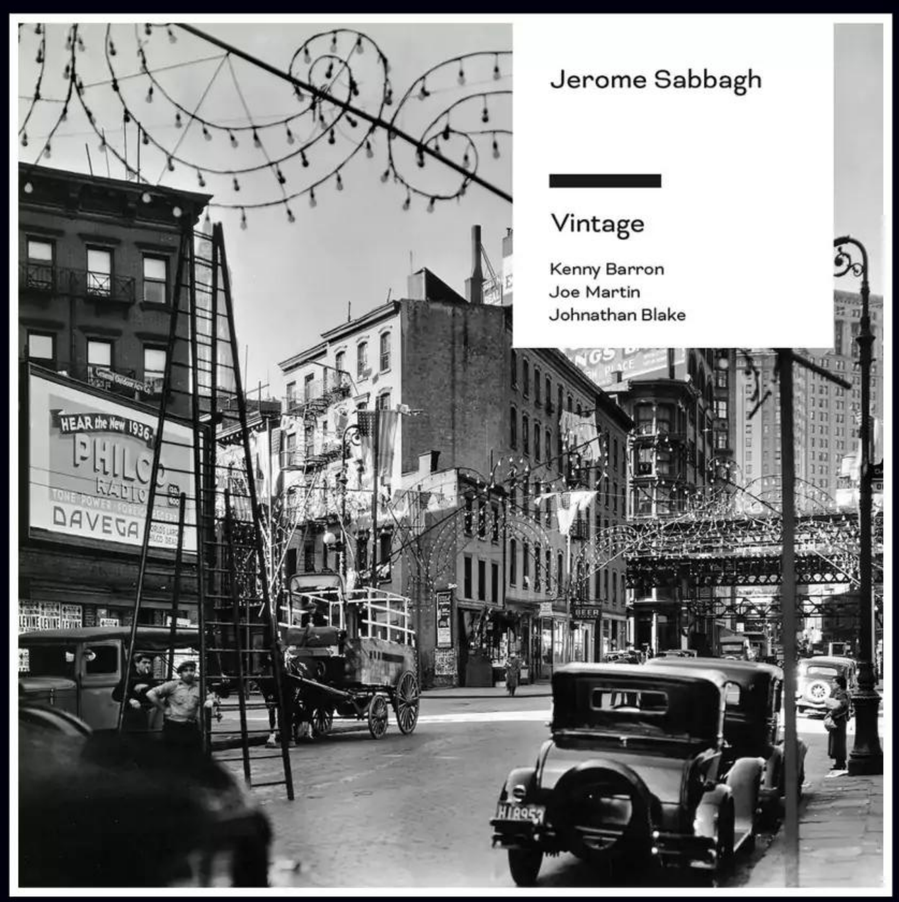
RECORD REVIEWS

EDITOR'S PICK

RECORDING OF THE MONTH



JEROME SABBAGH
Vintage

Sabbagh, saxophone; Kenny Barron, piano; Joe Martin, bass; Johnathan Blake, drums

Sunnyside SSC 1698 (LP). 2023. Jerome Sabbagh, prod.; Ryan Streber, Pete Rende, Bernie Grundman, engs.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★½
SONICS ★★★★½

This is an album with serious audiophile cred. It was recorded to analog tape on a Studer A800 MKIII at 30ips, by Ryan Streber at Oktaven Audio in Mount Vernon, New York. It was mixed, also at 30ips, on a custom, tubed Ampex 351, by Pete Rende. Bernie Grundman mastered it for vinyl and cut the lacquer, direct from the analog tape, on an all-tube system. The executive producer for the vinyl version is Hervé Delétraz of darTZeel, who, Sabbagh told me, helped finance the mastering and pressing. Sabbagh listened to the acetates and test pressings at Ana Might Sound in Paris.

As you might suspect after hearing all that, Sabbagh himself is an audiophile: Ken Micallef profiled him in 2018 in his "Musicians as Audiophiles" series.[1] Among other cool components, he owns a Garrard 401 turntable.

But in contrast to most new audiophile LPs—I'm intentionally excluding audiophile reissues of classic records—this one features frontline musicians. First, in addition to Sabbagh, is jazz-piano great Kenny Barron, perhaps best known for the jazz ensemble Sphere, his work with Dizzy Gillespie, and his past collaborations with Stan Getz; Barron has a chapter in Gene Rizzo's *The Fifty Greatest Jazz Piano Players of All Time*. Bassist Joe Martin seems to have played with every great contemporary, including Brad Mehldau, Mark Turner, and Chris Potter. He is Sabbagh's regular bassist, a member (with Ben Monder and Ted Poor) of his regular quartet. And then there's that current young titan of jazz drums, Johnathan Blake.

Upon listening to the album, I found the title a bit of an enigma: The songs are mostly straightforward, but there's nothing especially "vintage" about the music (unless "vintage" means lacking any pretense of "out"-ness or experimentation). So I asked Sabbagh. "At first, 'Vintage' was simply the name of the song that starts the record," he replied. "That song was written years ago. It seemed like an old-school kind of song, hence the title. Then I decided to title the album after the song. It wasn't meant too much as a statement, perhaps more like an allusion. To me, it fits the ethos of recording all in a room, of trying to let the music happen in an organic way and not overthinking things, and overproducing things. It's the way most great jazz records were done in the past, and it's certainly a way that I can relate to. ... But it also seemed to genuinely fit what is one of the most straight-ahead records I've done, especially with a true master such as Kenny Barron involved."

Vintage was made like that, with the musicians together in a room. "We didn't really have partitions. We tried to set up in a way to minimize bleed, using angling, mike placement, and some distance. We still had bleed, but, since we mixed the record, we could experiment with what sounded better to us. Not all bleed is bad. It's good to get the feel and the sound of people playing in a room. Also, the music is much better that way, in my opinion. As much as I care about the sound—and I really try hard to make the best sounding records I can—I care about the music more."

Which is what makes this a Recording of the Month instead of just another audiophile LP. *Vintage* is a proper jazz record, with talented musicians playing well, listening to and following each other. It's a mix of covers (Tadd Dameron's "On a Misty Night"; Billy Strayhorn's "A Flower Is a Lovesome Thing"; two Monk tunes—"We See" and "Ask Me Now"—and original Sabbagh compositions. Side 1 is the Sabbagh/Kenny Barron show. The rhythm section is more prominent on side 2, except the final track, which is all Sabbagh and Barron. The musicians are New York–based (Sabbagh was born in Paris), but to me the music has a West Coast vibe in that even the upbeat numbers have that laid-back feel.

The same could be said about the sound: excellent but laid-back. Easy to listen to. (Perhaps "vintage" fits here as well.) Compared to most mainstream records, it's on the mellow side, resembling what you'd hear in an intimate club. Sabbagh's tone is mellow; it's a tenor, but it sometimes has a timbre close to an alto. On Barron's piano, you hear more sustain than transient, more wool and wood than metal string (although this varies from track to track). All of which makes it easier to hear into the soundstage; the recording has good depth, and the more you turn it up—up to a point of course—the clearer the window into the studio becomes.

Great vintage photos by Berenice Abbott adorn the front and back covers—2 ×144 square inches of analog goodness. You can almost smell the cigarette smoke.—**Jim Austin**

1 See stereophile.com/content/musicians-audiophiles-jerome-sabbagh.

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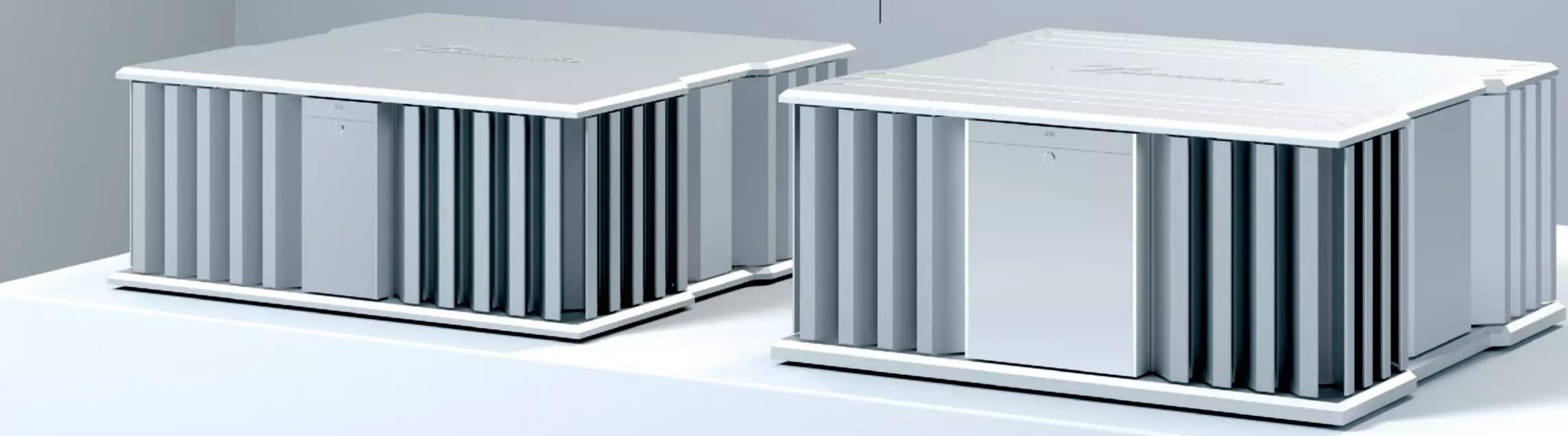

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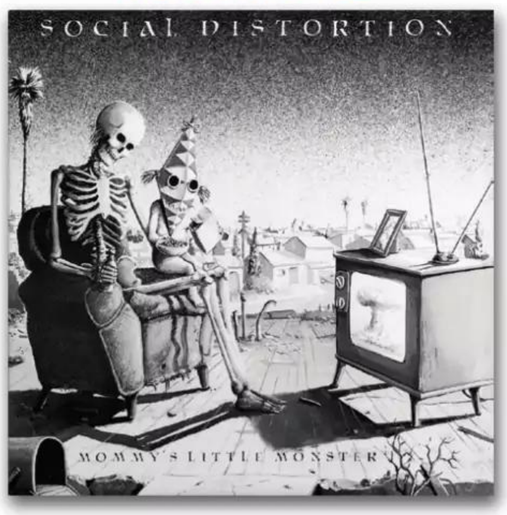

SOCIAL DISTORTION
Mommy's Little Monster, 40th Anniversary Edition

Craft Recordings CR00679 (auditioned as LP). 2023. Chaz Ramirez, Social Distortion, prods.; Ramirez, Chris Bellman, engs.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
SONICS ★★★★½

Social Distortion uniquely melded country, blues, rock, and of course hardcore punk into a sound that's a baseline for what's now known as "SoCal Punk." Acts like Bruce Springsteen, Green Day, Rancid, and Blink-182 joined the fan base that emerged when the band released 1983's *Mommy's Little Monster* on their own 13th Floor Records label.

Front man, lead singer, and guitarist Mike Ness was thrown out of his home by his father when he was 15. This record was released six years later. It contains no ballads, time signature changes, or strings. Such songs as "The Creeps (I Just Wanna Give You)," "Another State of Mind," and the title track comprise this tight, nine-song, 28-minute album, recorded in a single marathon session at Fullerton, California's Casbah Studio. The album drips with tales of a violent childhood and a feeling of authenticity that stands out among records of the time.

The record delivered a sense of intensity and angst. Sound quality was a distant second.

Craft Recordings celebrates the record's 40th anniversary with a reissue remastered for vinyl from the original analog tapes. Guitar solos have more sonic scope. Vocals seem better separated from the chaos. It all feels more spacious and approachable. Circa 2023, it's rare to run through a record so quickly. A record this length seems perfectly suited for vinyl—its original format of course. (A cassette tape version followed two years later.)

The package is nice, if basic for an anniversary reissue. The vinyl arrives in a gatefold jacket, like the original, but with no new liner notes to provide context and no bonus material. Still, this reissue helps tell that story with better definition that better fuels this powerful narrative.—**Ray Chelstowski**

MÖTLEY CRÜE
Shout at the Devil 40th Anniversary Edition

BMG 881288, reviewed from LP. 1983/2023. Tom Werman, prod.; Geoff Workman, Andy Pearce, engs.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
SONICS ★★★★½

Nowadays, Mötley Crüe is best known for scandals at levels to which Justin Bieber could only hope to one day approach: Tommy Lee's sex tapes, vehicular manslaughter of Hanoi Rocks drummer Nicholas "Razzle" Dingley by singer Vince Neil, near-ODs, Nikki Sixx's penchant for marrying Playboy Playmates and having near-death heroin experiences. They say that any attention is good, but is being the subject of the highest-rated episode of VH1's *Behind the Music*, or having your autobiography dramatized by Netflix, really a good thing?

Mötley Crüe's brand of hedonistic metal is an anachronism in 2023—they called themselves "the world's most notorious rock band"—but there was a time when they were the hottest thing in the glam-metal universe, dominating MTV. They have sold more than 100 million albums and notched several platinum record certifications. Yet, like most metal bands, they continue to be snubbed by the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame, even as rappers and country artists are admitted.

Mötley Crüe was founded by Nikki Sixx and Tommy Lee in 1981. The lineup stabilized when Mick Mars and Neil came on board. When the band's first full-length release, *Too Fast for Love*, recorded at L.A.'s Hit City West and issued in limited quantity on the band's own label, Leathür Records, was remixed and reissued by Elektra in 1982, the timing could not have been better. MTV had just gone live, and the band harnessed the new format with over-the-top theatrics for the screen.

Produced by Tom Werman (Ted Nugent; Molly Hatchet) with Geoff Workman behind the board (King Crimson; Journey), *Shout at the Devil* came out in September 1983 on Elektra, going gold in three months, platinum a month later, and ultimately selling more than 4 million copies. The video for "Looks That Kill" was a low point in 1980s misogyny, and during the tour in support of the album, with Van Halen and AC/DC, Neil bit Eddie Van Halen, Lee bit Malcolm Young, and Lee had a fistfight with David Lee Roth, almost getting the band kicked off the bill.

Shout at the Devil celebrates its ruby anniversary with a boxed set that recalls all the excesses of its decade. Included in the box is the remastered album on yellow splatter vinyl, a compact disc, and a cassette. A second LP contains "Demos & Rarities." Tunes from the first two albums are stashed on a pair of 7" EPs. Also in the box are lithographic prints of the cover art, tarot cards featuring the band members, a Ouija board with a planchette embossed with the band's logo, a pentagram séance board, a pentagram 7" adapter in a felt pentagram bag, the obligatory bandanna, and a black, devil-head candleholder with eye slots through which, when in use, a flame ominously flickers. Despite the huge pentagram on the cover of the box, or maybe because of it, this set would make a hell of Christmas gift.

If you are going to own one Mötley Crüe album, *Shout at the Devil* is the one to own—either that or the band's catchiest, most successful release, *Dr. Feelgood*, made when they were working on collective sobriety, which is akin to going from a monster truck rally to a demonstration of driverless cars.

The pairing of the title track and "Looks That Kill" is a glam-metal high point. The one-minute, 30-second multitracked Mars instrumental "God Bless the Children of the Beast" is cute, while the cover of The Beatles' "Helter Skelter," done without a hint of apparent irony, is nicely updated for the era. If there can be a deep cut on a platinum album, it is "Knock 'Em Dead, Kid," inspired—inspired!—by a beatdown Sixx received from undercover cops posing as a biker gang. "Dedicated to the LAPD" is written on the LP's inner sleeve.

The coolest part about the set, apart from that devil candleholder, is the demos and rarities LP. The A side has alternate takes of the title track, "Looks That Kill," "Knock 'Em Dead, Kid," and "Too Young to Fall in Love"—all equal to or better than the final product. The B side has three punchy Sixx tunes recorded at the sessions but left off the album, all as good as if not superior to those kept in their place—"Hotter Than Hell" (becoming "Louder Than Hell" on the next album, *Theatre of Pain*), "I Will Survive," and "Black Widow"—plus some snippets of backward chanting and music, playing into the "Satanic" theme.

This is what *Shout at the Devil* should have been from the beginning.—**Andrey Henkin**

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ROCK/POP

THE ALLMAN BROTHERS BAND
Bear's Sonic Journals: Allman Brothers Band Fillmore East February 1970

The Owsley Stanley Foundation & The Allman Brothers Band Recording Company (auditioned as LP). 2023. Pete Bell, prod.; Owsley Stanley, Paul Stubblebine, eng.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
SONICS ★★★★½

The Allman Brothers never had the live-recording resources of The Grateful Dead and other contemporaries. They'd record shows as best they could, and if it wasn't a good show, they'd record over that performance at a future gig. As a result, there are voids in the band's musical history, noteworthy performances lost or never put to tape.

In 1997, the Allman Brothers Band, in tandem with the Owsley Stanley Foundation, released *Bear's Sonic Journals: Allman Brothers Band Fillmore East February 1970*. It presents restored and mastered recordings of the Allman Brothers Band's performances at New York City's Fillmore East on February 11, 13, and 14, 1970, captured by legendary Dead soundman Owsley "Bear" Stanley. They now present what will be the last physical version of that music that will ever be released. A limited edition (only 5000 copies) in orange vinyl celebrates the work of Owsley and presents the earliest and best sound quality of the original Allman Brothers lineup.

In February 1970, the Allman Brothers Band had only been together for 11 months. At the Fillmore, Owsley, who had no prior experience mixing their music, rolled tape. The result is a seven-song set featuring blues covers "Mountain Jam" and "Whipping Post" plus the opener, the earliest known live recording of "In Memory of Elizabeth Reed," which had been written shortly before these shows. The sound is slightly muted and doesn't shine quite as brightly as their best-known live recordings, but it has a warmth that makes some of the jams feel more intimate.

At the time of this recording, they had released only one studio record. This show captures a band that had quickly caught its footing and was just about to break big and wide.—**Ray Chelstowski**

JAZZ

CHIEN CHIEN LU
Built In System

Lu, vibraphone; three others

Giant Step Arts GSA 010 (CD). 2023. Lu, Jimmy Katz, prods.; Katz, James Kogan, engs.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★½
SONICS ★★★★½

In jazz, it is rare for a label to become a reason in itself to buy an album. At various points in history, there have been such imprints: Blue Note, Riverside, ECM. Giant Step Arts is much smaller but belongs in this distinguished company, artistically, sonically, and graphically.

Chien Chien Lu, originally from Taiwan, is an imaginative, complete, original vibraphonist. Her early professional experience has mostly been in a band led by trumpeter Jeremy Pelt, who appears on *Built In System*. It is the most "straight-ahead" of GSA's 10 releases to date, but it feels vital and fresh. The eight tracks are Lu originals, all different, all meticulously assembled, all intriguing in themselves and more intriguing as foundations for improvisation.

Lu is quick, fluent, and instinctively lyrical on her instrument. When she solos, she thinks in long lines and graceful, flowing forms. She is less interested in calling attention to her chops than in celebrating the unique, resonant beauty of the vibraphone. The impression of selflessness extends to Pelt, who creates with focus and feeling within Lu's songs. Like Lu, he serves the music. Lu writes melodies that linger in the mind ("Träumerei" is a special example) and often lets Pelt define them first while she fills in a landscape of meaningful details, all around him. Her comping is as distinctive as her soloing.

Lu's arrangements exploit the rich sonorities made possible by her band's unusual vibraphone/trumpet front line. But the best track may be one without Pelt, "Full Moonlight." Alone with intuitive bassist Richie Goods and sensitive drummer Allan Mednard, Lu unfolds a quiet, deep, fervent personal testament.

Joel Ross, Sasha Berliner, Patricia Brennan, and Simon Moullier are leading a vibraphone revival in jazz. Add Chien Chien Lu's name to that list.—**Thomas Conrad**

MAREIKE WIENING
Reveal

Wiening, drums; five others

Greenleaf GRE-CD-1106 (CD). 2023. Wiening, prod.; Aaron Nevezie, eng.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★½
SONICS ★★★★½

To date, the career of Mareike Wiening has been fairly typical for a European jazz musician. She trained in classical music in Germany, switched to jazz, came west to pursue a master's degree at NYU, gigged on the New York scene for six years, and moved back to Germany. What is less typical is that she has kept a quintet together for nine years, with three Americans and a countryman. This band has now made three strong albums.

Wiening is on the growing list of impactful female jazz drummers. As a drummer, she is nuanced, clean and selective. As a composer, she crafts careful, complete, well-proportioned designs. As a bandleader, she conceives ensemble environments that are rich in themselves and that urge her collaborators into creative motion.

"Encore" and "The Girl by the Window" are representative. Both are rapt melodic moods, the first introduced by Felscher's darkly brooding bass, the second developed by Glenn Zaleski's elegiac piano. Then Wiening gives each piece to a second soloist. On "Encore," it is Rich Perry, one of the great unsung tenor saxophonists in jazz. Quietly, passionately, he rewrites Wiening's song but stays true to its spirit. On "The Girl by the Window," A-list trumpeter Dave Douglas, a guest on the album, beautifully blends Wiening's ideas with his own.

The only song not written by Wiening is an unexpected but inspired choice: "Balada," from 19th century Romanian classical composer Ciprian Porumbescu. But it belongs to Wiening as much as the other tracks here, because her arrangement reimagines it in the language of her band. Wiening initiates the subtle rhythmic energy. Then she allows Perry, Felscher, and guitarist Alex Goodman to present their responses to Porumbescu's solemn, mysterious melody as Zaleski threads fine strands of piano through it all.—**Thomas Conrad**

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JAZZ

BILLY MOHLER
Ultraviolet

Mohler, bass; Shane Endsley, trumpet; Chris Speed, tenor saxophone, clarinet; Nate Wood, drums

Contagious Music CGM008 (CD, available as LP). 2023. Dan Seeff, prod.; Pete Min, eng.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★½
SONICS ★★★★½

Some of the information in the press release for *Ultraviolet* may cause trepidation among purists. Bassist Billy Mohler is said to have "pop sensibilities." (He has played with Macy Gray, Dolly Parton, and Ringo Starr.) Mohler and producer Dan Seeff employed "unique post-production techniques to layer shifting sounds in each song."

But purists can relax. *Ultraviolet* is something valuable and hard to find: real jazz for the masses. If you have ever wished for a record that could be used to indoctrinate friends with "pop sensibilities" into jazz, Mohler is your man.

His tunes are exuberant, catchy, and all about the groove. His bass lines set their hooks deep. Those post-production techniques create subtle effects that expand the sonic landscape of the music. Mohler's 20-year involvement with the Los Angeles studio scene has not dulled the jazz chops he originally honed at the Berklee College of Music. Another reason why this approachable music is real jazz is the sidemen. Chris Speed, Shane Endsley, and Nate Wood possess unassailable jazz credentials. Speed is a fearless, free-thinking tenor saxophone improviser. Endsley is a take-no-prisoners trumpeter. They do not simplify their work to play with Mohler, but they do offer less diffuse, more on-point solos, and they participate fully in this album's celebration of groove.

Take "Evolution." Speed and Endsley sound like themselves, which is edgy. But Mohler incorporates their daring into his overarching purpose. His relentless bass ostinato and Wood's crashing, hissing cymbals generate something rare in hardcore jazz: a beat you can dance to.

There is one concession to the short attention spans associated with contemporary "pop sensibilities": *Ultraviolet* is only 32 minutes long.—**Thomas Conrad**

AMBROSE AKINMUSIRE
Owl Song

Ambrose Akinmusire, trumpet; Bill Frisell, guitar; Herlin Riley, drums

Nonesuch (WAV). 2023. Akinmusire, prod.; Adam Muñoz, Dave Darlington, engs.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★½
SONICS ★★★★½

Ambrose Akinmusire continues to expand his musical palette. After scoring a film (*Blindspotting*), writing for strings and voice (*The Imagined Savior Is Far Easier to Paint*), and appearing on a hip hop landmark (*To Pimp a Butterfly*), the gifted trumpeter returns here to jazz exploration.

Akinmusire, who's been playing professionally since high school, is a man of many moods and textures. Here, in a spare trio setting recorded at 25th Street Recording Studio in his hometown Oakland, California, he showcases the reflective side of his inquisitive conception, one that's often more expansive than "jazz" implies.

Drummer Herlin Riley and the great guitarist Bill Frisell, both accomplished texturalists, are perfect collaborators for Akinmusire's angular, plaintive statements. "There was something wonderful about paring everything back to just this one space, with three people playing live, and us creating within its limits," he has said about the album. "When there are only a few instruments, you realize that moods are fragile and things can come apart quickly." The title ballad appears in two versions. The first states the rising melody with Frisell adding near-perfect stringed accompaniment to Akinmusire's musings. "Owl Song 2" is slower, with Riley's hushed, subtle rhythms, Akinmusire stretching lines, Frisell mirroring his tones and pace.

In the darkly melodic "Flux Fuelings," the trumpeter's pure tone stays in its upper range as Frisell explores the low end of his instrument. Tonal choices sway back and forth on "Mr. Frisell," where the guitarist sensitively duets with the leader. The session's most upbeat number, "Mr. Riley" swings as Akinmusire solos to Riley's imaginative progressions. Another worthy chapter in the life of a multidimensional artist.—**Robert Baird**

CLASSICAL

REINBERT DE LEEUW
Der nächtliche Wanderer / Abschied

Netherlands Radio Philharmonic Orchestra, Reinbert de Leeuw & Edo de Waart

Challenge Classics CC72957 (CD, reviewed as DSD). 2023. Anita Wijnen, prod.; Jan Stellingwerff, Frank Mathijssen, engs. *Abschied* eng.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★½
SONICS ★★★★★

The music of composer/conductor/pianist Reinbert de Leeuw (1938–2020) is as astounding as anything I've heard. His final two orchestral works, both recorded live, may have been composed 40 years apart, but both are complex, layered, and filled with dark, aggressive, and soul-shakingly violent energy.

When de Leeuw wrote his *Abschied* (Farewell) in 1973, he felt he had said all he could possibly say through composition. He went out with an emphatic bang, with an almost 23-minute piece with an air of emphatic finality that sounds like universes colliding repeatedly until everything collapses, only to resume colliding once again. Thanks to extraordinary digital restoration by Bert van der Wolf and Oude Avenhuis of Northstar Recording Services, the 2017 live recording, conducted by Edo de Waart, is guaranteed to blow you away, assuming your system can handle it.

Despite writing a few subsequent works, de Leeuw eschewed composition for full orchestra until 2013, when he created and conducted the world premiere of his 46-minute, single-movement *Der nächtliche Wanderer* (The Night Wanderer) for orchestra and taped accompaniment. (The tape includes accordionist Bart Lelivelt, and actor Steven Scharf reciting, in German, the poem on which the symphony is based.) After the remarkably realistic sound of a dog barking in the night, the live recording unfolds softly and slowly. Silence and texture are central to haunted passages eventually punctuated by tremendous percussive jolts and violent threats. The horror and terror of the music grows and accelerates until Hölderlin's chilling poem about fear, strangling, and death reaches our ears. The ending is as unforgettable as all that precedes it.—**Jason Victor Serinus**

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CLASSICAL

SANDRINE PIAU
Reflet

Sandrine Piau, soprano; Orchestre Victor Hugo, Jean-François Verdier

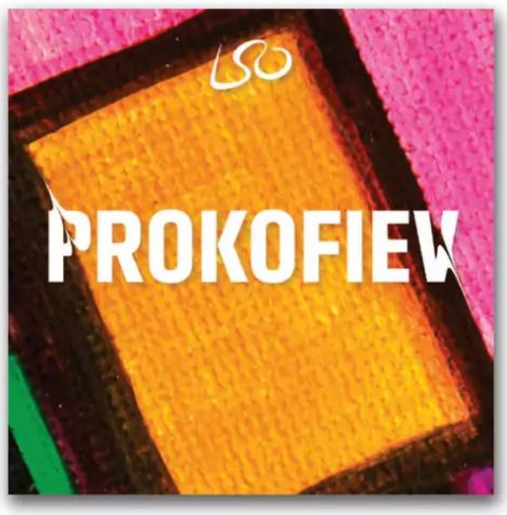
Alpha1019, CD (reviewed as 24/96). 2023. Vincent Mons, Laure Casenave, engs.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
SONICS ★★★★★

Sandrine Piau is something of a miracle. Fifty-seven at the time of this recording, she sounds almost as fresh and free of voice as she did in her late 20s. Her interpretations have grown deeper with the passage of time, but she retains an understated simplicity that transport us with sincerity rather than a surfeit of word painting.

Reflet consists entirely of French songs about light, illusions, and "the land of luminous transparency." Setting poetry by Baudelaire, Leconte de Lisle, Hugo, Verlaine, and others, it begins with the oldest song on the program, Hector Berlioz's "Le spectre de la rose" from *Les Nuits d'Été*. Although Piau voices the highest notes with less volume than those immediately below them, her voice is so beautiful, the sound so sublime, the song's mystery so perfectly conveyed that the rendition convinces. Then come two of Henri Duparc's best known songs, "Chanson triste" and "L'invitation au voyage." No one can replace Maggie Teyte's haunting slowdowns and idiosyncratic emphases, but Piau's beauty is profound, the magic of Duparc's orchestrations fully realized.

Scattered between gloriously played interludes by Debussy—"Claire de lune" from Suite Bergamasque, orchestrated by André Caplet and "Pour remercier la pluie au matin," orchestrated by Ernest Ansermet—come Ravel's *Trois Poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé*, Britten's *Quatre Chansons Françaises*, and Koechlin's less well-known *Quatre Poèmes d'Edmond Haraucourt*. Whether the mood be of sensual abandon amidst the twin pulls of love and death (Ravel's "Soupir"), the intoxicating mix of daytime scents and nighttime wonders (Britten's "Nuits de juin"), or sheer fantasy (Koechlin's "Aux temps des fées"), Piau lives each song as if composed for her. This is a marvelous recital.—**Jason Victor Serinus**



PROKOFIEV
Symphony 5

London Symphony Orchestra, Gianandrea Noseda

LSO Live LSO0379 (CD). 2023. Nicholas Parker, prod.; Neil Hutchinson, ed.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
SONICS ★★★★★

From the start, when the winds project the opening theme with a stately dignity, Noseda lays out the Fifth with a gratifying clarity and a solid sense of direction. The firm, lyrical flow, far from undercutting the grinding interjections, render their intrusions more ominous. The second theme is conspicuously faster; the forthright development underlines the obsessive-compulsive quality of some accompaniment motifs. Throughout the movement, the broad, powerful climaxes build without straining, and the sonorities, even at their loudest, remain transparent.

In the *Allegro marcato*, the perky clarinet and other melodic elements, punctuated by lean, slashing accents, stand in sharp relief against the tick-tock accompaniments. The arrival at the *Meno mosso* is full-throated; the passage builds affirmatively, and its return is more reflective. The accented basses provide sufficient tonal weight to bring off the flowing *Adagio*; the music slides almost unnoticed into and out of more dissonant, menacing episodes. At the climax, the brass triplets are clean and pillowy, not heavy and portentous; the high violins ease smoothly into the opening theme's final recap. After a ruminative opening, the propulsive closing *Allegro giocoso* chugs along nicely; the whirling themes give way to relaxed, lyrical inflections in the second group.

The LSO, as suggested, contributes posh, sensitive playing—kudos to the principal reeds, especially the clarinet, who keeps busy. The wide-ranging engineering, without a trace of stridency at the peaks, is equally fine. All told, this is certainly the best new Fifth I've come across in a long while, one that steers an expert middle course between the mild grandiloquence of the standard reading and the brisk, terse approaches of Szell and Jansons.

—**Stephen Francis Vasta**

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CLASSICAL

TCHAIKOVSKY
Symphony No.4

Cleveland Orchestra, Franz Welser-Möst

The Cleveland Orchestra TCO0009 (WAV 44.1-16). 2023. Elaine Martone, prod.; Gintas Norvila, eng.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★½
SONICS ★★★★★

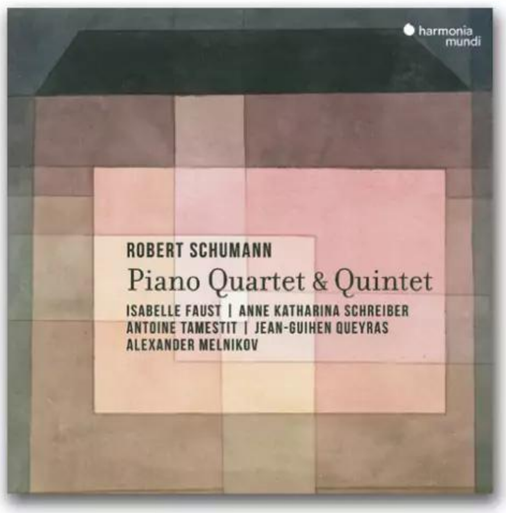
If you're looking for a resplendent Fourth, here it is. The big, deep brass reproduction in the opening fanfares; the clean woodwind definition within a natural acoustic; the rich, resonant bass support as the textures expand—all this makes for the most "present," vividly colored production ever.

Musically, we're on slightly shakier ground. In the first movement, Welser-Möst avoids marking off sections in the customary manner, playing it "all of a piece." In the process, however, he can push forward breathlessly. The horns shave time off the longer notes in their opening fanfare; the *Moderato* bumps unceremoniously through its first major cadence; and the motto theme's returns are hectic—it's like a run-on sentence. Even when the conductor allows the clarinet to relax, he doesn't trust it, moving things along shortly thereafter. In the first big climax, the dominant strings push ahead of the woodwind countertheme (discreetly obscured by the engineers).

The middle movements go well. The oboe sings simply in the *Andantino*, which makes a soft landing on the central section; the pizzicato *Scherzo*, in this context, is surprisingly moderate. The *Finale* suffers bouts of instability, the woodwind runs are—well—runny, the return of the motto speeds up, undercutting its ominous power. Still, it's bright-eyed and joyous, with nice delicacy in the second group.

The playing is first-rate. The strings are silky and mysterious at the *Moderato*'s start—though the bows sometimes sit unnecessarily long—and the *Finale*'s *forte* runs are spanking clean. The reeds are sensitive, the brass firm and forthright. The textures are clear, even at full throttle with the percussion going; quiet passages are all a notch above the indicated dynamics but retain a gentle demeanor.

So much excellence; I wish it were consistently maintained.—**Stephen Francis Vasta**



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Piano Quartet & Quintet

Isabelle Faust, Anne Katharina Schreiber, Antoine Tamestit, Jean-Guihen Queyras, Alexander Melnikov

Harmonia Mundi 902695, CD (reviewed as 24/192). 2023. Stephan Cahen, prod. and eng.

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
SONICS ★★★★½

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The quartet begins deceptively in a mournful mode before the clouds lift and lyricism abounds. Even so, amidst the music's romantic flights, joy can never be assumed. The second movement *scherzo* scurries about restlessly before ending on a hopeful note, at the very end. Song is at the heart of the next movement; the melody is gorgeous and tender. Only in the spirited *finale* does Schumann finally seem to say that he's writing music like this because he can, so let's drop our guard, celebrate, and enjoy the chase.

I haven't listened to Schumann's chamber music for many years. I was delighted to find myself greeting the opening bars of the Piano Quintet with the thought, "Oh, it's this one!" Once you hear the music, you may feel similarly, because the opening melody and wild tumble that follow are unforgettable. The contrast with the second movement's funeral march is intense. Its melody, too, has such a profound effect on listeners that it's no wonder that it surfaced in Bergman's film *Fanny and Alexander* and in less sublime fashion in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. The 3rd movement *scherzo* is another wild chase, up and down, culminating in delightfully energetic fashion. Romance reigns in the final fugue, which leads some of the most marvelous music to ever end a quintet.

Sonically, the gut strings occasionally sound a mite grainy in *fortes*, but generally the authentic sonorities of the period instruments seduce.—**Jason Victor Serinus**

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RE-TALES

BY JULIE MULLINS

THIS ISSUE: An established New York brick-and-mortar retailer, Adirondack Audio & Video, spins off its two-channel business, HiFi Loft. What's next for each?

Channel separation

Before and since the pandemic, many traditional hi-fi dealerships evolved to expand the products and services they offer—into custom install and home integration, in particular. There has also been a bit of a multichannel/home theater resurgence.

Shifts in the market and personal interests led to changes at Adirondack Audio & Video, an established company with locations in upstate New York and—as HiFi Loft—in Manhattan. The company recently split into two separate entities. Under new ownership by a former partner/employee, just before Labor Day, 2023, HiFi Loft spun off from Adirondack and opened a new second location in Glens Falls, New York, about 45 minutes north of Albany. By all accounts, the separation was amicable, even favorable for each party.

Michael Timko founded Adirondack Audio & Video in 2008 in Queensbury, New York, with a customer-turned-investor partner. Over time, the store moved to a different Queensbury storefront just up the road. Timko bought out his former partner, who had decided to pursue other interests, and later brought on a few smaller partner-investors including Adirondack employee Jason Tavares in 2010. Adirondack then expanded, opening a Manhattan location called the HiFi Loft. That name spoke volumes: Not only did "loft" evoke the more urban location; "hifi" signified the new location's focus on old-school, component-based two-channel audio. Adirondack had long been involved in commercial AV, custom installation, and integration, working with builders, architects, and designers, while hi-fi was Tavares's main interest. In time, he was the only one at Adirondack focused on two-channel audio; the rest were focused on custom installation.

Both sides of the company—CI and two-channel retail—were going strong after COVID, Tavares told me: "We were doing well, [each] in a position to be going separate ways. The hi-fi part of the operation had taken on a life of its own. The two sides didn't share much except a common bank account." He and his partners decided that, instead of competing for the same resources, they'd operate as separate businesses while referring customers to each another based on individual wants and needs.

Timko described the situation in a similar way. "We just reached a point where we said, 'Okay, we don't think we want to pursue hi-fi anymore as a company,'" Timko told me. "And Jason said, 'Well, I love hi-fi, what am I going to do?'" Timko suggested talking through it. Tavares proposed that

Timko and the other partners buy him out and let him run with the hi-fi portion of the business with HiFi Loft, freeing them up to focus on CI. And that is what they did. "It's a win-win for everybody," Timko said.

The decision made good business sense. As planned, each refers customers to the other; a few home-automation brands appear among the hi-fi companies listed on HiFi Loft's website. Tavares continues to pursue his two-channel business across two locations: the existing HiFi Loft in NYC's Hell's Kitchen neighborhood, which he is retaining, and the new one in Glens Falls.

Tavares sees the Glens Falls store as a special opportunity. "I could design a whole new space up north, in my vision of what I'd imagine a great hi-fi store to be like," he said.

It also offers a chance to take advantage of the new space, which has a unique history. The Glens Falls store is in a circa-1930s building of approximately 2400ft². In the 1970s, another retailer, Glens Falls Business Machines, remodeled the space with wood paneling—popular décor at the time. It was in good condition and gave a nod to the classic hi-fi era, so Tavares kept it more or less intact. He described the showroom as a large room with a high ceiling and big windows. In addition to equipment, the store sells new and used vinyl records, which "has been a draw for people." Plus, the Glens Falls store is a better location than densely populated NYC to receive shipments and store inventory.

Tavares moves between the two locations—it's about a three-hour drive—but each store has its own sales manager. Tavares hired Mike Deutsch, a former employee of Lyric Hi-Fi,[1] who'd worked there for 17 years until it closed in 2021, as full-time sales manager for the Manhattan store, which has a street-level entrance and is, in Tavares's words, "a very stately affair." The Glens Falls location is "more a celebration of music."

It's also a place where he hopes to educate a new generation on the possibilities for hi-fi playback. "I'm attracting a younger clientele up north—local people who love music who don't yet have what you'd call hi-fi," he said. "Many are transitioning from Sonos, for instance, into a real hi-fi system." Some people have come into the Glens Falls store who are already collecting records but don't yet have equipment to play them on. Tavares is also considering hosting listening events at the upstate store, possibly including album-release parties; some local bands have approached him about this.

He carries different products between the two locations—though there's some overlap. "I focus more on the more affordable stuff up north and my higher-end stuff in Manhattan," Tavares said. Both stores carry McIntosh, Triangle, and Electrocompaniet. The Manhattan store stocks Boulder and MSB Technology among other brands. But he's always taking gear back and forth, he said. "If someone's in the city and wants an NAD, I can get that to them."

Tavares encourages people to come into the store even if they don't have the budget for a full-blown hi-fi system. "Even if you come in with the smallest budget, you get the royal treatment," he said. "We're completely welcoming here." ■

1 See stereophile.com/content/lyrical-denouement.

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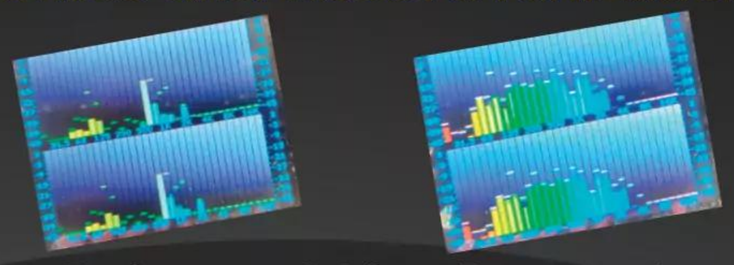

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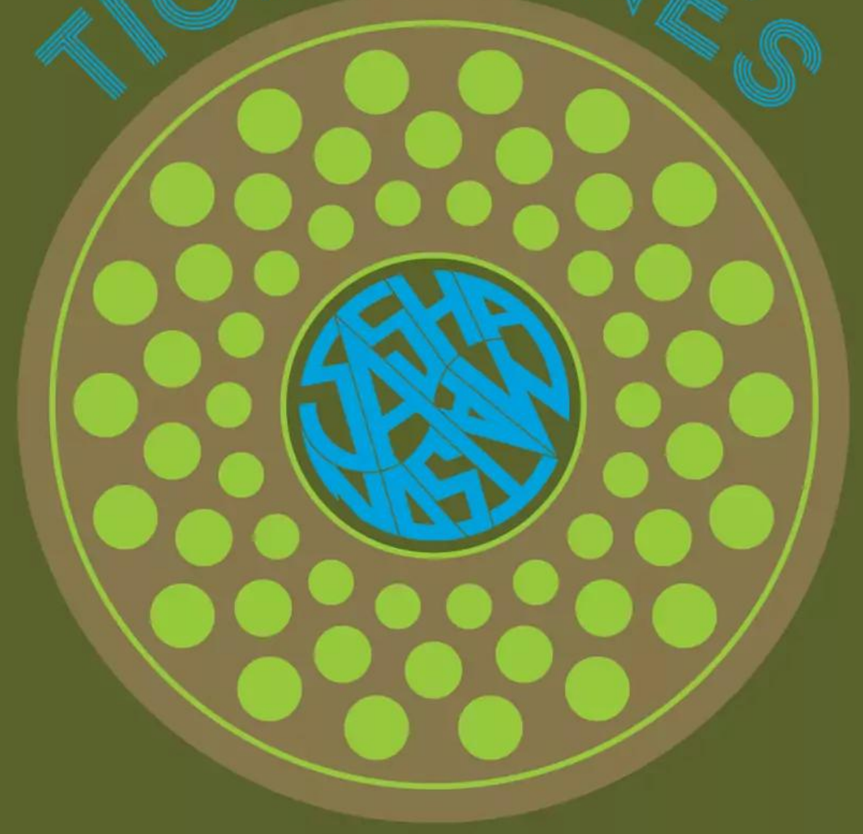

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MANUFACTURERS' COMMENTS

THIS ISSUE: Representatives of Luxman, Ferrum Audio, JMF Audio, Focal, and Audio Research respond to our reviews of their products.

Luxman L-509Z

Thanks and praises to *Stereophile*, Ken Micallef, and John Atkinson for a thorough evaluation of Luxman's latest, the L-509Z integrated amplifier.

As other Luxman L-509Z owners have discovered, Ken describes an amplifier "beyond quiet" and capable of presenting recorded music with images that are "large, dense, and spatially profound, presented within a soundstage of considerable scale." This same L-509Z owners' group would agree that "this is an amp of brilliant purity and fluid communication." Ken's comment that "the Luxman inhabited my room as if it had won an election and was implementing its own agenda" makes us think Luxman Corp's engineering team has succeeded in achieving their goal for the benefits of L.I.F.E.S. circuitry while under development.

In the same way that Luxman's recently introduced PD-151 MARK II and PD-191A turntables expand music enjoyment via enhancements including three speeds with individual variable pitch control and superior tonearms, so too does the Luxman L-509Z, with a comprehensive suite of user-selectable control features complementing its excellent sound.

The L-509Z's new LECUA-EX volume control allows precise adjustment with a tactile feel, especially useful at low volumes or when using either of two headphone outputs. As Ken indicated, the large numerical LED display and output meters make "reading volume levels a cinch." Minor control functions including subsonic filtering, the mono switch, and loudness (for low listening levels) are available only on the IR remote handset. Engaging the line-straight switch bypasses all minor functions, channel balance, and the three tone controls.

With the calendar change to 2024, we are just a year away from the 100th anniversary of the Luxman brand. We hope all music listeners can audition the Luxman L-509Z, along with our other new Z-series integrated amplifiers.

John Pravel
Luxman America

Ferrum Wandla

Wandla is quite unique with its MQA processing. The MQA decoder is only active when there is MQA stream at the input; otherwise it is bypassed, allowing the use of filters other than the MQA one. This allows filter tuning with non-MQA files—however, it complicates software architecture, and there is price for it. It may cause some erroneous behavior of switching from MQA to "normal" FLAC.

At the time the review was conducted, Wandla had a different set of interpolating filters. We changed them recently based on the response from our clients; we call this DDF, for Dynamic Digital Filtering. Because we know the advantages of HQ filters (as underlined in this review), we decided to replace two of the ESS filters with two new HQ filters, leaving the filters most appreciated by our clients. We still have one minimum-phase filter, but now instead of ESS minimum phase filter, we now have an HQ Apodizing minimum-phase filter.

Marcin Hamerla, CEO
HEM

JMF HQS 7001

We want to thank *Stereophile* and especially Jason Victor Serinus for his excellent, in-depth review of the JMF Audio HQS 7001 mono amplifiers. Anyone who knows Mr. Serinus knows what a passionate music lover he is and how often he listens to live classical concerts. JMF Audio strives to make components—amplifiers, preamplifiers, phono stages, power line filters, and cables—that offer passionate music lovers the ultimate musical experiences in their own homes for all music genres. So when a passionate audiophile and music lover like Mr. Serinus praises our amplifiers to this degree—when they make him feel "surrounded by such beauty" (without even using the JMF PRS 1.5 preamplifier)—this aligns perfectly with JMF Audio's goal of how we want any owner of a JMF Audio component to feel.

Michael Vamos, Audio Skies
Distributor for JMF Audio
in North America & UK.

Focal Bathys

Focal is happy that *Stereophile*'s overall experience with Bathys was great. Bathys for Focal is a key product, the first-ever Bluetooth headphones with ANC and a hi-fi sound, which is of course Focal DNA. It opens the door to a new market and new customers: people who want active products, easy to use, with hi-fi sound. Bathys ticks all the boxes, and Focal is very

proud to have new customers enjoying its headphones and discovering that first-class sound!

DAC mode is very interesting for people who want "hybrid" headphones, perfect for traveling, with very good sound and noise reduction in Bluetooth, but capable of pushing the sound quality even further.

Focal regrets the issues Rogier had with DAC mode with an iPhone. Not all USB-C/Lightning adapters are intended for use with sound; some are for recharging only. This is why we mention in our FAQ that the adapter needs to be "OTG"; OTG adapters will work for sound too (not only charging). With the new iPhones with USB-C, this will be easier in the future.

Mégane Montabonel,
Marketing Group Manager
Focal

Audio Research I/50 with DC1 DAC module

Our thanks to John Atkinson for installing the DC1 DAC module in his I/50 integrated amp and clearly explaining the procedure. We expect most owners will order the module preinstalled when they order their I/50, but if they want to add the module later, we will install it at no charge (except shipping) for customers in the US.

We are flattered by the very favorable comparisons that were made with a DAC that retails for 18 times the DC1's $1000 price. The DC1 was not designed to be merely good enough, but to be a serious product that competes sonically with outboard DACs selling for significantly more. This was not easy, as it also needed to be as flexible as possible, with RCA, USB, TosLink, and Bluetooth inputs. We appreciate that John's comments confirm we achieved our goal.

Dave Gordon
Audio Research

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Aqua Acoustic Quality	23
Audience	54
Audio Advice	70
Audio Skies	117
AudioQuest	53
Axiss Audio	6, 46, 48
AXPONA	146
BEK HiFi	151
Bel Canto	84
Burmester	138
Cabasse	108
The Cable Company	28, 29
CH Precision	45
Clarus	107
Clearaudio	10
Crystal Cable	155
Dan D'Agostino	43
David Lewis Audio	72
dCS	91
DS Audio	60
Dynaudio	104
EISA	148
Elusive Disc	136
Emotiva	100
Estelon Audio	92
EverSolo	112
Excel Audio	68
Feliks Audio	88
Fezz Audio	62
Focal Naim America	126
GoldenEar	9
Gryphon	114
Hana	58
HiFi Rose	64
I-O Data Device	102
Jim Suhre	119
Joseph Audio	145
KEF	35
Kimber Kable	78
Kirmuss Audio	151
Kuzma	150
Lumin	25
Luxman	66
Magico	2
Metaxas & Sins	125
MoFi Electronics	Back Cover
Morrow Audio	57
MSB	87
Music Direct	14, 20, 21, 144
Nexus Audio Technologies, LLC	16, 37, 147
Now Listen Here	8
Ortofon	120
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PrimaLuna	26, 134
Primare	37
Rogue Audio	57
Scott Walker Audio	98, 150
SME Limited	32
Soulutions	6
The Sound Organisation	96
Source Systems LTD	25, 102
Stenheim	147
Stromtank	31
SVS	80
T+A Electroakustik	95
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Ultra Systems	151
Underwood HiFi	110
Upscale Audio	18, 26, 88, 108, 134
Used Cable	150
VAC	130
Vandersteen Audio	140
Vitus Audio	83
VooDoo	122, 150
Weiss Engineering	50
Wilson Audio	4
Wireworld	132
Wynn Audio	12

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MY BACK PAGES

BY PHIL BRETT

THIS ISSUE: The great Pogues frontman passes.

Shane MacGowan, poet of displacement

There was a time in London, in the mid-'80s, when a party would invariably close with a couple of Pogues songs. It didn't matter what music had preceded them—it could be reggae or soul or whatever—but the Pogues would be played, to enthusiastic sing-a-longs by the party guests. Even I was known to join in occasionally.

As often as not, one of the songs would be the Pogues's cover of Ewan MacColl's "Dirty Old Town." It didn't matter that the song had been written about Salford (a city in Greater Manchester): Everyone would feel it had been written about their own town. This wasn't true just in my part of London, which has a large Irish diaspora, but in many other places across the world.

This was one of several gifts possessed by Shane McGowan, who died November 30, 2023: Whether he had written the song or not, you felt he was singing about *your* world, *your* life. He involved you in the song. It was a skill similar to that possessed by Bruce Springsteen: You may never have visited New Jersey—couldn't even point to it on a map—but you can still relate to the stories within the songs.

With MacGowan, that was especially true of Britain's Irish community. He was born in England, to Irish parents—a family heritage reflected in his music. He spoke for the Irish in Britain, especially in London, and as he did so, his songs acted as a conduit for many (including me) to the rich heritage of Irish music.

The Pogues' success and popularity came at a time when anti-Irish feeling in Britain was high, to the point that acts were committed against them. This was when the "Troubles" in Northern Ireland were at their fiercest, including bomb attacks on "the mainland." MacGowan bravely didn't dodge the subject. Irish Republicanism was a theme in many of his songs, including "Streets of Sorrow/Birmingham Six," which tells the story of the Birmingham Six and the Guildford Four, two groups of Irishmen wrongly convicted of IRA bombings. Now that they have been released, it is safe to talk about these miscarriages of justice, but it certainly wasn't back then.

MacGowan was enthusiastic about the Clash and was a regular at The Jam's early gigs. I came across him with the 1978 release of the single "King of the Bop," backed by "Nervous Wreck," by his first band, The Nipple Erectors. With its punk-rockabilly sound, this single still stands as one of the great neglected songs from the time. It remains a favorite of mine.

The Pogues were founded in 1982, with Shane MacGowan as singer, lead writer, and figurehead. The early releases didn't quite capture the excitement of hearing them live. The power of the band and the

charisma of MacGowan just weren't fully conveyed—not that their first album (*Red Roses for Me*, from 1984) didn't have some good tunes. "The Dark Streets of London" is one of his many great songs about the city. The standout of his London tunes—possibly of all his songs—is "A Rainy Night in Soho," from the 1986 EP, *Poguetry in Motion*. It is beautiful and could easily have been taken from the Great American Songbook: His lyrics are a wonderful, poetic description of love, using London's Soho as metaphor. It's a song you play and play *and play*. (I would also recommend searching out, on YouTube, Sinead O'Connor's sublime cover, performed on Irish television station RTE One's *The Late Late Show*.)

Poguetry was, like the album that followed (1985's *Rum, Sodomy & the Lash*), produced by Elvis Costello. This was a purple patch for MacGowan: *RS&tL* is a bona fide classic. This is where you'll find "Dirty Old Town" but also classics such as "A Pair of Brown Eyes" and "Sally MacLennane." The whole set has life and vibrancy about it—a feeling that it's good to be alive.

Costello was replaced by Steve Lillywhite for the next Pogues album, *If I Should Fall from Grace with God*, from 1988. The Pogues kept their Celtic influences but incorporated others from farther afield, Spain and even Turkey. Perhaps the album's only problem is the risk of such a monster of a song overshadowing the rest. On *Grace*, that song is "Fairytale of New York," which is regularly voted by the British the best-ever Christmas song. MacGowan's bittersweet duet with Kirsty MacColl is one of the UK's festive traditions, played in shops, on the radio—everywhere. But, as glorious as it is, it is just one of many gems on the album. "Fiesta" and "Bottle of Smoke" are two more of the album's great songs.

His work of those years is the best evidence of the skill and artistry of Shane MacGowan—evidence that proves beyond doubt that he was one of music's best songwriters. Good albums followed, and MacGowan eventually left the band in 1991. It is true that these latter years were troubled by drink and drugs, something that, now that he has passed, elements of the media want to focus on. I don't. When you listen to "Satisfaction," you enjoy Keith Richards's riff; you don't wonder what he was on when he played it. Shane set up a new band (The Popes), who, whilst not reaching the consistency of previous years, did have moments of brilliance: 1994's "That Woman's Got me Drinking," from the album *The Snake*, was perhaps the best example.

It is not necessary to just take my word about his genius, not when he received praise from the likes of Dylan, Springsteen, Strummer, and Cave. Even better, let his songs speak for themselves. *Listen*, and hear Shane MacGowan tell stories about the pain and the romance of people displaced—songs that express a deep understanding of the longing for a home. ■

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